THE CONTEST OF LIFE

Stories of Trust, Duty and Human Struggle from Mithila

PRATISPARDDHA

Original Maithili Short Story collection authored

by

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

THE CONTEST OF LIFE

Translated into English

by

Yugeshwar Sah

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Pallavi Prakashan
Berma/Nirmali

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The Contest of Life is the English translation of Pratisparddha, a Maithili short-story collection by Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal.
Translated into English by Dr. Yugeshwar Sah

The Contest of Life is the English translation of **Pratisparddha**, a Maithili short-story collection by Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal. Rooted in the living soil of Mithila, these ten stories portray village life, family relationships, social change, moral struggle, and the inner search for self-knowledge. Mandal's characters are ordinary people, including farmers, teachers, elders, students, householders, and seekers, yet their experiences raise larger questions of trust, conduct, duty, faith, competition, wealth, nature, influence, dharma, and human responsibility.

The stories range from themes of communal harmony and social decline to self-belief, courtesy, ethical action, and the wise use of life and wealth. Written with simplicity and reflective depth, they show how everyday events in rural society can carry profound philosophical meaning. This translation seeks to preserve the emotional force, cultural fragrance, and ethical seriousness of the original Maithili while presenting it in clear and readable British English.

The Contest of Life is more than a collection of stories; it is a thoughtful reflection on human conduct, social conscience, and life's continuing moral trials. It invites readers to see village experience as a mirror of broader human truth and ethical choice.

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Dedication

To the living soil of Mithila,
to its villages, farmers, teachers, elders, mothers, daughters, workers, and ordinary households,
whose labour, faith, suffering, and moral courage give meaning to life.

This book is dedicated to all who carry humanity quietly
through trust, duty, restraint, service, and action.

- Yugeshwar Sah

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APPRECIATION

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Authentic rural life is not a fantasy; rather, it is an enduring way of life that has been an integral part of the Indian way of living. A writer can become a true medium for communicating this way of life only when he has encountered it firsthand and continues to experience it as a lived reality, rather than as something virtual or imagined.

The writings of the renowned author Jagdish Prasad Mandal make a successful attempt to portray rural culture in its original form. The extent of his intimate association with rural culture is evident from his works written in various literary genres. Writers who so authentically reveal the realities of rural life are indeed rare in Maithili literature.

The English translation of the short-story collection Pratisparddha by such a foremost writer as Jagdish Prasad Mandal, rendered by the learned teacher, incisive thinker, and accomplished translator Dr. Yugeshwar Sah, simultaneously bears testimony to all these qualities of the translator.

The ten stories in the collection are characterised by a natural and effortless communicability in the original. In the process of translation, Dr. Sah has preserved this inherent simplicity and spontaneity. The flow of the translated stories

remains uninterrupted, which is a testimony to the translator's skill and sensitivity.

Confident of the success of this book, brought together by such an exceptional writer and an equally distinguished translator, I extend my heartfelt wishes to Dr. Yugeshwar Sah for a bright and successful future.

- Dr. Satyendra Kumar Jha

Poet, Author and Translator

Foreword

☰

The Contest of Life is the second book translated by Dr. Yugeshwar Sah from Maithili into English after **Prithviputra: Son of the Soil.** Originally written in Maithili with the title Pratisparddha by Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal, **The Contest of Life** is a collection of ten moving short stories that every reader should read and enjoy. The characters, themes and settings make the stories more vivid and compel the readers to read a story in a single sitting. The author uses raw personal stories and deep emotions, bridging the gap between personal experiences and universal human truths that touch every reader.

Maithili literature, which has its own rich history, shows the true heart and soul of the Mithila region. Though, due to some reasons – geographical, social, and political – its growth and development have remained slow. In this scenario, the efforts of Dr. Yugeshwar in bringing out this collection in English are praiseworthy. Translating the stories from Maithili into English has opened a vast new world of regional literature for global readers. Dr. Yugeshwar has kept the soul of Maithili alive in English that is very difficult for a translator. Through his art, he tries to depict the soul of the village. The natural beauty, simplicity, family ties, moral grit, polite grace, unity,

and a rising journey towards inner strength are all the same in the English version as we find in Maithili. These stories also offer a profound meditation on human conduct, social responsibility, and the enduring trials of conscience.

These stories show that even today, rural areas hold deep-rooted customs passed down through generations, and the dominance of blind faith continues in the age of science and technology. It is evident that people are not ready to believe that progress is often delayed due to blind faith. It is a barrier to critical thinking and scientific inquiry. Due to the flood of misinformation people stop looking for real facts. Real evidence gets pushed aside for comfortable beliefs. True learning stops when doubt is not allowed. The dominance of wealth and power in society keeps equality and justice far away from the common masses. All these issues encourage readers to question themselves rather than others.

Translation breaks down linguistic barriers and cultural borders, and allows regional and national literatures to merge into a global literary network. May **The Contest of Life** be an engaging read and motivate translators in every Indian language to bring regional literary treasures to broader national and international audiences.

Dr. Yugeshwar deserves all accolades for translating Maithili work into English and bringing out this collection for the readers of the English language. His dedication to teaching and guiding students selflessly, and service to Maithili and Indian English literature together are remarkable. In May 2026, he played a significant role in successfully organising an international conference on "Contributions of Mithila Region in the Development of Indian Knowledge Tradition: In the

Context of Literature and Culture," and in the same year, this book of stories is getting published. All these efforts indicate the arrival of a new star on the literary scene of India.

- Prof. Vijay Kumar Roy
University of Allahabad &
President, World Association of Authors and Researchers
https://www.waoar.org/

Preface

☰

The Essential Voice of the Collection

The Contest of Life is the English translation of *Pratisparddha*, a Maithili short-story collection by Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal. The stories are rooted in the rural life of Mithila, but their meaning is not confined to one region. They rise from villages, fields, homes, fairs, schools, markets, family relations and everyday speech, yet the questions they raise belong to human life everywhere. They deal with trust, duty, moral choice, self-knowledge, service, action and the search for right conduct in a changing world. Translation can give 'afterlife' to the literary works of Jagdish Prasad Mandal. It can also provide voice to the voiceless and marginalised people in the society.

Translating is a utilitarian act. It is the most powerful medium through which Maithili literature can become an integral part of world literatures across the globe. All other regional literatures of India have crossed geographical and linguistic boundaries and are read, taught and researched around the world since the tradition of translation is well developed in these vernacular languages. There is a serious shortage of English translations of Maithili literature in this globalised scenario. Translating a Maithili text is a herculean task for it is deeply rooted in its indigenous cultural practices

and translation resources such as reliable and comprehensive dictionaries are not available. We need to translate more works from Maithili into English and vice-versa if we genuinely love our native language and literature and truly long to enrich our Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and sincerely promote interdisciplinary research in this field. Translation, therefore, can serve as panacea.

Mandalji does not look at village life from a distance. He writes from within it. His villages are not decorative settings; they are living spaces where human character is tested. A courtyard, a field, a village road, a school, a fair, a market, a phone call, a drought-stricken afternoon or a simple conversation becomes, in his fiction, a place where life reveals its deeper truth. Ordinary incidents open into moral and philosophical reflection.

The strength of these stories lies in their ability to find large meanings in small events. Mandalji shows that a village is not merely a place of habitation. It is a field of human conduct. Here trust may survive across communities, courtesy may be tested through changing relations, faith may be exposed as false or confirmed through action, and wealth may either serve life or deceive it. A student's doubt, a farmer's anxiety, an elder's anger, a teacher's advice or a saintly figure's life may become a way of understanding society and the self.

His characters are farmers, teachers, students, householders, elders, saints, migrants, women, men and ordinary village people. They do not hold great worldly power, yet they face serious questions. What is trust? What is right conduct? What is the meaning of duty? How should one live in society? What is the difference between outer religion and true

action? How should wealth be used? How does one recognise one's own nature? How can a person remain human when society begins to lose balance?

Mandalji does not impose an ideology upon life. He draws thought out of life itself. His ideas arise from situations, not from slogans. There is certainly a teaching tone in his fiction, but it is not dry preaching. It comes as people's wisdom, tested by labour, age, suffering and social experience. Elders speak, teachers explain, villagers reflect, and ordinary people gradually arrive at meaning through dialogue.

For this reason, his storytelling may be called people-centred in the truest sense. He trusts the moral intelligence of village life. He sees that even the most ordinary person may become a source of insight when life is faced honestly. In his hands, rural Mithila becomes not only a social landscape, but also a living school of ethics, self-knowledge and human responsibility.

In this sense, The Contest of Life is a collection about the continuing trial of human beings. The contest is not only between people, families, communities or social groups. It also takes place within the human mind: between fear and trust, pride and humility, idleness and action, imitation and self-knowledge, greed and responsibility, outer show and inner truth. Mandalji's vision remains firmly connected with the earth, but the concerns of his stories reach far beyond one region. Through Mithila, he speaks to the wider world of human conscience.

The Changing Face of Society

The world of Mandalji's stories stands between tradition and modernity, but it also moves beyond that simple division.

His village is no longer a closed and settled world. It is touched by migration, money, education, politics, mobile phones, new ambitions, weakened trust, changing family relations and growing uncertainty about social values.

Old structures still remain. Caste, community, ritual, family honour, village opinion and inherited customs continue to shape human conduct. Yet these structures are constantly disturbed by new forces. Money changes behaviour. Migration creates both confidence and distance. Political loyalty becomes unstable. Religion is sometimes reduced to dress, display or personal gain. Education may increase, but without self-knowledge it remains incomplete. Communication becomes easier through mobile phones, while real human nearness may become more difficult.

This is where Mandalji's fiction quietly touches the postmodern condition. His stories show a society in which no single explanation can fully contain life. Dharma is tested not by name or appearance, but by action. Wealth is both a means of life and a possible trap. Education becomes meaningful only when it awakens judgement and inner discipline. Society is not built merely by caste, community or tradition, but by conduct, trust, service and responsibility.

The postmodern world is often marked by fragmentation, uncertainty and a loss of stable centres. Mandalji sees these conditions on the ground of rural Mithila. He sees the crisis of trust in communal tension, the loss of moral steadiness in politics, the market-like use of religion, the anxiety of educated youth, the confusion caused by comparison, the new form of dowry, the pressure of consumer desire and the insecurity of ordinary people caught between old values and new pressures.

Yet he does not present this changing world as hopeless. His stories do not surrender to disorder. Against fragmentation, he places trust. Against show, he places action. Against greed, he places responsibility. Against borrowed influence, he places self-refinement. Against fear, he places service and human love. In this way, The Contest of Life holds the uncertain reality of the present age while searching for a moral centre within it.

Unfaltering Trust

The opening story, Unfaltering Trust, gives the collection a deeply humane beginning. Set in Sultanpur, a village of Mithila, it first introduces the land, its fields, crops, festivals and shared rural life. Within this setting grows the friendship between the families of Ramesh and Rahmat, a bond that has continued for four generations. Their relationship goes beyond caste, community, food, dress and religious identity. The story makes it clear that true social life does not live only in temples, mosques, rituals or public names. It lives in courtyards, doorsteps, shared visits, mutual help and the quiet trust of everyday life.

This friendship receives a living form when Manmohan and Mahmood decide to join their sons, Ramesh and Rahmat, in friendship at the time of school admission. What begins as a childhood bond gradually becomes a relation of family, duty and moral closeness. The two families stand by each other in illness, domestic work, marriage and social need. Through them, the story presents Mithila's village life not as an abstract idea, but as a lived culture of affection, cooperation and shared responsibility.

The force of the story becomes sharper when caste tension and communal fear enter Sultanpur. The old harmony

is disturbed, and even Ramesh and Rahmat cannot freely visit each other's homes. Mobile phones create a strange modern distance: they can speak, but they cannot meet. The story thus shows how fear, identity and public pressure can weaken direct human contact, even when inward trust remains alive.

Yet the story does not end in despair. Rahmat's words to Ramesh affirm that such fires last only for a short time, while true trust lives longer. In this way, Unfaltering Trust turns village friendship into a larger human value. It tells the reader that when society burns with suspicion, only deep and unfaltering trust can protect the moral soul of life.

Wayward People

The second story, Wayward People, turns from communal trust to the moral disorder of village society. Through Hiralal Bhai's anger and his decision to leave Rohitpur, the story brings before us the pain of a sensitive man who feels that the values of his fathers and forefathers have been lost. His anger is not merely personal. It arises from his awareness of false holiness, greed, deceit, political wavering and social decline around him.

The examples of Ruplal and Kishunlal are central to the story. Both use religion and saintly appearance for personal gain. One sells an amulet to a helpless woman in the name of cure, while the other changes his religious identity and raises money in the name of building a temple. Through these figures, the story exposes the danger of outer religion without inner truth. It shows how faith may become a market, and how simple people may be exploited in the name of belief.

The story also brings politics into the frame. Hiralal Bhai is disturbed by the way village people change their political

loyalties without clear thought. This wavering points to a deeper crisis of judgement. Public roles become unstable, moral values weaken, and truth is often hidden behind image, dress, slogan and performance.

Yet the story does not approve of escape. Muneshwar listens, understands and slowly brings Hiralal Bhai back to balance. His advice is simple but deep: one should not run after the crow merely because someone says it has carried away one's ear; one should first check one's own ear. In this way, Wayward People becomes a story of social criticism as well as moral restraint. It reminds the reader that even in a disturbed society, one must not abandon home, family and village in anger. One must stand by one's own thought, remain human, and continue to live with care, patience and inner firmness.

The Ghost

The third story, The Ghost, is a short but deeply symbolic tale about work, discipline and the meaning of life. It presents a sage who has recognised his own duty and shaped his life around regular action. He lives in the forest of life with a clear sense of time, order and purpose. Against him stands the ghost, Kukant, who has no work and no direction. Because of this emptiness, he disturbs the sage by scattering his books and manuscripts.

The ghost is not merely a supernatural figure. He is a symbol of a restless and workless mind. When a person has no purpose, his energy turns towards mischief, disorder and disturbance. The sage understands this clearly. He does not punish the ghost; instead, he gives him work. By asking him to climb up and down the mango tree without end, the sage places the ghost within the discipline of action.

This story explains one of the central ideas of the collection: work gives shape to life. Human fulfilment does not come from idleness, empty thought or aimless movement. It comes from meaningful action. The tree in the story becomes the tree of life, a tree whose end can never be reached. To climb it is to remain engaged in the continuing discipline of living.

In a world full of distraction, noise and scattered attention, the ghost represents the disturbed mind that has lost its centre. The sage offers a simple but powerful answer: give the mind a task, give life a direction, and disorder will turn into discipline. Thus, The Ghost teaches that the ghost of work must be placed within one's thought, because only through work does life find peace and satisfaction.

Self-Belief

The fourth story, Self-Belief, deals with one of the deepest needs of human life: faith in oneself. Harekrishna is an ordinary man, but his question is not ordinary. He wonders why the result of action is not always good, even though a human being is considered a thinking and discerning creature. His difficulty begins from a simple truth: he has lived by watching others, following society, and acting without a clear inner judgement.

The story shows that self-belief is not born from pride or blind confidence. It grows through thought, testing, discipline and right action. Harekrishna first feels that he should ask others before acting. Then he chooses Karyanand Kaka, a man respected in the village for his conduct and wisdom. Through their walk to the market, the story turns an ordinary journey into a lesson in life.

Karyanand Kaka teaches him the value of priority, time,

inner strength and regular work. He shows that one must do one's own work as far as possible, because the habit of work keeps human strength alive. He also connects self-belief with fearlessness. A person who has faith in himself becomes free from many hidden fears.

The story reflects the anxiety of a person who has lost inner direction in a confusing social world. People imitate others, doubt themselves and remain trapped in fear. Self-Belief offers a quiet answer: organise work, awaken inner strength, serve those in need, and let love remove bitterness. In this way, self-belief becomes not only personal strength, but also a path towards social harmony and human welfare.

Courtesy

The fifth story, Courtesy, examines the meaning of civil conduct in a changing social world. It begins with a literary and cultural programme organised by the Maithil community in Delhi. Through this setting, the story shows how Mithila has moved beyond its old geographical boundary. Maithils now live in different parts of India and abroad, but wherever they gather, they try to preserve their language, literature, culture and social behaviour.

At the centre of the story stands Ramsevak Bhai, an elderly writer who travels from his village to Delhi to attend the programme. The journey, the literary gathering, the cultural sessions and the warmth of meeting old acquaintances present a living picture of Maithili literary culture outside Mithila. Yet the real moral question arises after his return, when Sukdev complains that Ramsevak Bhai came to Delhi but did not visit him.

Through Sukdev, the story presents a man who has risen

economically but has not grown equally in understanding. He has gone from poverty to a better income in Delhi, built a house and gained social confidence, but this rise has also produced pride and poor judgement. He fails to understand that an invited elder attending a public programme cannot be blamed for not visiting a younger relative. It was Sukdev's duty to come to the programme and meet him.

The story makes it clear that courtesy is not a small social formality. It is a sign of inner refinement, right understanding, respect for age, sense of occasion and awareness of one's place in a relationship. Migration, money, mobile communication and sudden social mobility create new forms of disorder, where people may gain wealth, houses and confidence, yet lose the older grammar of respect and conduct.

Ramsevak Bhai's anger finally becomes a moral lesson. He does not merely scold Sukdev; he teaches him that one must learn how to behave with different people in different situations. In this way, Courtesy presents civil conduct as a force that preserves dignity in relationships and protects society from arrogance, ignorance and careless speech.

The Contest of Life

The sixth story, The Contest of Life, gives the whole collection its central title and inner direction. It begins with the truth of the present age: competition is everywhere. People compete with people, families with families, castes with castes, communities with communities, and societies with societies. Yet the story does not treat competition merely as an outer race. It shows how the pressure of competition enters the mind and unsettles a person's whole sense of life.

Ramkishore has failed twice in the administrative

competitive examination. His age for other government jobs has passed, and only one chance remains before him. His despair becomes deeper because agriculture as a livelihood, though his family owns fifteen bighas of land, no longer appears secure or respected. Through him, the story presents the crisis of an educated rural youth who stands between failed ambition, declining agriculture and an uncertain future.

The meeting with Gaurinath Master Saheb turns the story towards self-knowledge. The teacher does not merely console Ramkishore. He shows him that the first step towards success is to know oneself. A person who keeps comparing himself with others loses his own path. One who learns to examine his time, work, thought, mind, intellect, judgement and soul begins to find direction.

The story also makes an important distinction between worry and reflection. Aimless thinking is worry, while planned thinking with a clear purpose is reflection. This distinction gives the story its philosophical strength. The Contest of Life reflects a world of comparison, failure, unstable desire and broken confidence. Yet it offers a clear answer: life's real contest is not only outside, in examinations or jobs, but within the self. True victory begins when a person turns from fear and comparison towards self-knowledge, disciplined thought and meaningful action.

The Beneficial and the Harmful

The seventh story, The Beneficial and the Harmful, studies society through the contrast between two lives. Set in Champapur, a medium-sized village of Mithila, the story first presents the land, streams, floods, droughts, fields, settlement and rural structure. This detailed setting is important because

the story sees human conduct as closely linked with land, family, work and social order.

Through Harihar and Murlidhar, the story shows two opposite directions of life. Both are educated, both belong to farming families, and both remain in the village after passing their B.A. Yet their ways are different. Harihar uses his contact with people, under the cover of L.I.C. work, to criticise others and carry tales from one person to another. His behaviour creates distrust, bitterness and dispute in society. Through him, the harmful force in social life becomes visible.

Murlidhar, on the other hand, chooses a constructive path. He improves farming, limits grain cultivation to family need, grows cash crops and arranges a tyre-fitted cart for the use of the village. His work benefits both his family and society. The story therefore presents the beneficial not as an abstract moral idea, but as practical action that improves life around us.

The story also raises serious social questions. It speaks of child marriage, dowry, caste boundaries, family responsibility, the fall of older values and the rise of money-centred habits. It shows how one social evil may decline while another takes stronger root. The story reflects a society moving from older feudal habits towards a new money-driven order, where relations, honour and morality are being reshaped by economic desire.

Yet the story does not merely criticise change. It asks how change should be handled. If society allows harmful conduct to grow, it becomes a disease. If people use freedom with responsibility, new life can begin. In this way, The Beneficial and the Harmful becomes a story of choice. It

reminds the reader that every society contains both forces, and the future depends on which force human beings nourish through their conduct.

Nature and Influence

The eighth story, Nature and Influence, examines the relation between a person's inner nature and the influence received from others. It begins with a broad reflection on human life. Every human being has a nature of his own, yet no one lives untouched by the words, actions and examples of others. Good influence can refine life, while bad influence can disturb it. The story therefore places before the reader a basic question: how should a person protect and improve his own nature while living among many kinds of influence?

Rabindra, a college student, becomes the centre of this question. After hearing his professor speak in class on nature and influence, he begins to think deeply. He is not among the sharpest students, but he is sincere and eager to learn. His curiosity takes him to Sonbhadra Babu's residence, where the teacher explains the difference in simple words: nature is one's own inborn disposition, while influence is the quality that enters a person through what he sees or hears from others.

The story also stresses the importance of one's state of mind. Sonbhadra Babu explains that a positive mind understands things positively, while a negative mind turns understanding in a negative direction. This gives the story its practical value. It does not treat education merely as classroom knowledge. It connects learning with inner condition, discipline, self-refinement and right living.

Nature and Influence also reflects the pressure of borrowed knowledge, private tuition, unequal learning

conditions and scattered attention. Rabindra's difficulty is not only intellectual; it is also social and psychological. The story suggests that a human being may receive many influences, but life becomes successful only when one refines one's own nature, keeps a positive mind and shapes life according to the true nature of a human being.

The Essence of Dharma Lies in Action

The ninth story, The Essence of Dharma Lies in Action, gives the collection one of its clearest spiritual and human messages. It tells the life journey of Gyanchan, who is lost as a child in the Ram Navami fair at Janakpur and is taken by Bhikhari Baba to Kalyanpur Sthan. What begins as an accident becomes the beginning of inner growth. Away from his village and family, Gyanchan enters a life of discipline, service and reflection.

Kalyanpur Sthan is not shown as a place of empty ritual. It is almost like a farming household, with land, cattle, wells, a pond, orchards and daily labour. The people living there work, listen to Bhikhari Baba's discourses, and live beyond caste and rank. In this atmosphere, Gyanchan slowly loses fear and begins to understand the meaning of human life. Service becomes his way of living.

After thirty years, Gyanchan returns to Mohitpur. No one recognises him by face, but his inner strength and love for humanity make him larger than an ordinary man. People begin to call him by different names: Gyanchan Baba, Atmaram Baba, Vivek Baba and even Bhagwan Baba. These names show how society recognises different qualities in him.

The story is important because it places dharma not in outer marks, names or sects, but in action. Gyanchan Baba

teaches the young that dharma is not lost anywhere and is not hidden under anything. It lives in karma. As the action is, so is the dharma. The story speaks against the fragmentation caused by identity, caste, distance, language and culture. It brings the reader back to one simple truth: all human beings share one essential human nature, and the highest dharma is service through action.

Some Are Deceived by Wealth; Others Outwit It

The tenth story, Some Are Deceived by Wealth; Others Outwit It, closes the collection with a deep reflection on drought, farming, wealth and the meaning of life. It begins in a dry, drought-stricken season. More than half of Sawan has passed, Nag Panchami is near, yet there has been no proper rain. Paddy seedlings are drying up, the fields remain uncultivated, and the faces of farmers have lost their colour. Through this opening, the story presents not only a season of drought, but also the fear and uncertainty that surround agrarian life.

The conversation between Kishor, Sumit Bhai and Manohar gradually turns this immediate crisis into a larger question. The shortage of rain, the failure of timely cultivation, weak irrigation, lack of cold storage, poor electricity and the pressure of survival all reveal the fragile condition of the rural economy. The story also compares local farming with Punjab, where farmers do not depend only on rain. Through this contrast, Mandalji shows how nature, technology, policy and human effort together shape rural life.

The central thought of the story lies in Sumit Bhai's statement that wealth is not life. Wealth is only a means for life. A person who earns and uses wealth for the sake of life outwits

wealth. But one who forgets life itself and runs after wealth in order to gain life is deceived by wealth. This gives the story its moral and philosophical depth.

The story reflects the anxiety of a world driven by money, insecurity and survival. Climate uncertainty, migration from villages, the failure to save, and the desire to measure life by wealth all create a troubled human condition. Yet the story does not reject wealth. It teaches right use. It reminds the reader that responsibility, conduct and wise action build destiny. Life must remain greater than wealth, because wealth without life's purpose becomes a trap.

The Inner Thread of the Collection

Although the ten stories in The Contest of Life arise from different situations, they are joined by one inner thread: the moral test of human life. Each story opens a separate world, yet all of them return to the same central concern. How should a human being live? What should guide conduct when society changes, values weaken, fear spreads, wealth attracts, and relationships come under pressure?

Five elements stand at the centre of this collection: trust, action, judgement, service and self-knowledge. They are not presented as abstract ideals. They appear through people, events and ordinary situations. Trust becomes visible in the bond between Ramesh and Rahmat. Action becomes the answer to idleness, confusion and empty belief. Judgement helps a person distinguish between worry and reflection, between true religion and display, between wealth as a means and wealth as a trap. Service opens the way towards human love. Self-knowledge gives direction to those who feel lost in comparison and competition.

These elements form the moral base of Mandalji's storytelling. His stories show that society may change, systems may change, and money, politics, migration and communication may alter human relations. Yet the real worth of a person is still decided by conduct, action and consciousness. A human being is not measured only by wealth, education, caste, community or social position. He is measured by how he behaves, how he serves, how he thinks, how he uses his freedom, and how far he remains true to his inner moral self.

In this sense, The Contest of Life is not only a collection of village stories. It is a study of human conduct under pressure. The contest that gives the book its title is present in every story. It is the contest between trust and suspicion, duty and neglect, wisdom and confusion, service and selfishness, self-knowledge and blind imitation. Through this inner thread, the ten stories become one larger reflection on life, society and the ethical responsibility of being human.

The Purpose of the Translation

The purpose of this translation is not merely to carry words from Maithili into English. It seeks to carry the feeling, rhythm, moral force and cultural life of the original stories into clear and readable British English. Mandalji's stories are deeply rooted in the speech, soil and social experience of Mithila. Their strength lies not only in what is said- but also in how village people speak, think, remember, argue, advise and understand life.

For this reason, the translation tries to preserve the simplicity of the original narrative, the warmth of rural dialogue, the seriousness of moral reflection and the quiet force of folk wisdom. The aim is not to make the stories foreign to

their own world, but to open that world to readers of English while keeping its cultural fragrance alive.

Many words from Maithili rural life carry more than a dictionary meaning. Words such as dharma, *gamchha*, *sthan*, *bigha*, *katha*, *makhana* and *kojagara* carry memory, custom, geography, faith, labour and lived culture. Here katha refers to a local measure of land. Some such words have therefore been retained in the translation where their cultural value would be weakened by a plain English substitute.

At the same time, the language has been kept simple and direct, so that the reader may enter the stories without difficulty. The translation seeks a balance between clarity and cultural faithfulness. It aims to let the English reader feel the inner life of Mithila, its villages, households, fields, festivals, anxieties and moral concerns, without losing the natural dignity of Mandalji's original voice.

Reflections on Postmodernity

Mandalji does not write in the language of theory, nor do his stories announce any literary movement. Yet his fictional world recognises many crises of the present age through ordinary rural life. The village in these stories is no longer a fixed and self-contained space. It is crossed by migration, money, politics, education, mobile communication, new desires and weakened forms of trust.

His stories show a society where identity has become tense, community relations have become fragile, tradition has begun to loosen, and moral certainty has grown weak. Religion may turn into display. Politics may lose steadiness. Wealth may become a measure of worth. Education may remain incomplete without self-knowledge. Communication may become easier,

while real human nearness becomes harder. The individual mind, caught between old values and new pressures, often becomes anxious, lonely and unsure.

This postmodern condition is not presented through heavy terms, but through people and situations: a friend afraid to visit another friend's house, a man wishing to leave his village in disgust, a migrant forgetting courtesy, a student searching for clarity, a farmer facing drought, a youth crushed by competition, and a saintly figure reminding people that dharma lives in action.

Yet Mandalji is not a writer of despair. He sees fragmentation, but he also searches for renewal. Against suspicion, he places trust. Against disorder, he places disciplined action. Against greed, he places responsibility. Against empty display, he places service. Against confusion, he places self-knowledge. In this way, The Contest of Life recognises the broken and uncertain face of the present age, but it also offers a path of rebuilding life through conduct, restraint, work, love and moral awareness.

Conclusion

The Contest of Life rises from the villages of Mithila, but its human meaning is far wider than any one region. These ten stories open ten different doors of life. Through them, the reader enters the worlds of trust, social disorder, self-belief, courtesy, competition, rural change, nature, influence, dharma, wealth and human responsibility. Together, they form a moral map of life.

The strength of this collection lies in its quiet truth. It does not present life as simple. Society changes, relations weaken, faith is tested, money attracts, education creates hope

and fear, and human beings often lose direction. Yet Mandalji does not leave the reader in confusion. Again and again, his stories return to conduct, service, judgement, restraint and inner awakening.

The real contest in this book is not merely the outer competition among individuals, families, communities or social groups. It is the deeper struggle within the human being: between dharma and adharma, confusion and judgement, wealth and life, influence and nature, fear and self-belief. In this sense, *The Contest of Life* is not merely a collection of stories. It is a thoughtful journey into the moral life of human beings.

Mandalji's Mithila becomes a mirror of the larger world. Its villages, fields, homes, fairs, schools, markets and conversations reveal the continuing test of humanity. The book finally reminds us that life becomes meaningful not through possession, pride or outward success, but through trust, action, service, self-knowledge and the courage to remain human.

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Unfaltering Trust

☰

There is a village called Sultanpur in Mithilanchal. In fact, there is both certainty and uncertainty surrounding villages and their names. There is uncertainty because villages did not come into being at the same time, under one single idea and therefore names could have followed one fixed pattern. Yet there is certainty as well, influential individuals emerged from time to time, and the old names of those villages, names had been handed down through generations, were changed in their honour. Those new names then continued in use. Whatever happened, and however it happened, belongs to the subject of history.

At present, I am speaking of the village of Sultanpur, and so I shall confine myself to Sultanpur alone. Sultanpur is not like other villages. Some villages are shaped by the streams and rivers that flow through them. As the land is eroded in some places and covered with sand in others, their form and appearance become different from those of other villages. The very character of the landscape takes on a distinct shape. Once the land differs from that of other villages, its crops, orchards, and rural way of life are bound to be different as well. We often find that in villages where water spreads widely and floods

occur frequently, jamun trees, particularly the smaller variety, are more abundant. In villages where floodwaters spread less, or do not reach at all, a greater variety of fruit-bearing trees can be found. But that is not the point at the moment. For now, it is enough to say that in Sultanpur, Ramesh and Rahmat were born in the same month, Asin, about fifteen days apart. Ramesh was born before *Durga Puja* (*Sharadiya Navaratri*) while Rahmat was born after *Durga Puja.*

The structure of Sultanpur village is such that there is not a single stream or watercourse there, nor is the arrangement of its fields like that of other villages. By the arrangement of fields, I mean their form and level. When there are different kinds of fields, low-lying and higher fields, there is naturally a difference in cultivation and yield. In low-lying fields, water gathers; as a result, either nothing grows properly, or even if something does grow, the crop suffers from excess water.

The land of Sultanpur is level. It is completely flat. It is neither highland nor lowland. Because the terrain is uniform, the crops across the whole village are of one kind, and the effect of drought and heat also falls in the same way. Since the land is level, the general pattern of life and cultivation too remains largely the same. With the cultivation of newer varieties of paddy, the yield of the whole village appears almost uniform. In Sultanpur, the paddy that matures in about one hundred and twenty days is grown in large measure, and by the time *Asin* arrives, the crop has already come into ear and spread across the fields. Seeing the crop, the same joy rises in the hearts of all the farmers of the village.

For four generations, friendship had continued between the families of Ramesh and Rahmat. The relationship between

the two families had become so close that an outsider, someone from beyond the village, could hardly imagine that there was any difference of caste or community between them. Manmohan, Ramesh's father, and Mahmood, Rahmat's father, would sit together, eat and drink together, and even dress in much the same way. In the present age, just as differences have emerged in food and drink, they have also found their way into dress and appearance. But most of the time, Manmohan and Mahmood would sit together and talk about their lives. Whether it was a visit to the market or an errand to another village, they would go and return together.

Even so, people from outside, that is, people from other villages, thought of Sultanpur as a Hindu village. There were several reasons for this, but two were particularly important. The first was that Hindus formed the majority: about seventy to eighty percent of the families were Hindu, while twenty to thirty percent were Muslim. The second reason was the number of places of worship. Sultanpur had more than a dozen Hindu temples, such as a shrine of Dharamraj, two Mahavir temples, a Kali temple, two Ram temples and others. The Muslims, on the other hand, had only one mosque and one *Eidgah*.

But whatever may be said, temples and mosques are only the visible signs. The real bond lay elsewhere. Just as Muslim men and women freely came and went in the courtyards and the doorways of Hindu homes, Hindu men and women likewise moved freely in the courtyards and the doorsteps of Muslim homes. There was frequent interaction, familiarity and everyday contact between them.

Today is the full-moon day of *Asin*. During the month, people had spent fifteen days observing *Matri Navami* and *Pitri*

Paksha, with their rites and offerings, and after that they had celebrated *Durga Puja f*or ten days. Today was also *Kojagara*. In all those families where a marriage had taken place during the year, *Kojagara* too would be observed. Though marriage takes place between a boy and a girl, the ceremonial gifts and offerings of *Kojagara* go to the boy's house. The girl's family carries the gifts to the boy's family. There is one more thing here. *Kojagara* is not observed among all Hindu castes. There are some castes in which Kojagara is observed, while there are others within the Hindu community where it is not celebrated.

The distance between Manmohan's house and Mahmood's house was about one *bigha*. Each family owned a pair of bullocks and a she-buffalo. Their lands were also much alike and consequently their crops, food habits and way of life were also remarkably similar.

On one side there was the reddish glow of the full-moon night of *Asin*; on the other, *Kojagara*, the festival of *paan* and *makhana*. Manmohan and Mahmood, both having received the invitation, reached Gopikrishna's house around eight in the evening. As it happened, the ceremonial gifts from Gopikrishna's son's in-laws had not yet arrived. The invited villagers had begun to arrive, one by one and in twos, at Gopikrishna's doorstep. Gopikrishna had already made arrangements for them to sit. The gifts from his son's in-laws were expected to arrive, but as they had not yet come, the distribution of *paan* and *makhana* had been held back.

Manmohan and Mahmood sat together, talking about their families. First they spoke of the paddy swaying richly in the fields. As they talked, both men agreed about the *Sita* paddy in the field. *Sita* is the name of a variety of paddy, fine and

beautiful to look at, high-yielding and pleasant in taste. Both men agreed that never in their lives had there been such a good crop, such a fine yield of paddy. After speaking of the paddy, their thoughts turned to their families. Within a month, both men were blessed with sons, and they agreed that the two boys, too, should be bound in friendship. Alongside familial ties, personal friendship between individuals has its own significance and place.

Time moved on. It is well known that just as time is constantly in motion, so too is everything in this world. A child is born. With the passage of time, he grows from childhood into boyhood, from boyhood into youth and eventually into old age.

After four years, just as Ramesh became old enough to go to school, so did Rahmat. The two men, Manmohan and Mahmood, thought that since the day after tomorrow was Thursday, they should enroll the boys at school. Thursday is commonly considered an auspicious day. Another name for Thursday is *Guruvaar*, the day of the guru, which means a day of light, or a day of knowledge.

Both men took their sons to the village lower primary school. Although they had set out separately from their homes, they reached the school at the same time. There was only one teacher in the school and the number of pupils was less than fifty. The situation today has changed. Now children study in the same school from the first class up to the middle level, that is, up to the seventh class; because of this, the number of teachers has increased and the number of pupils has also grown. The thinking of the village society about educating children has also changed. With this change in attitude, ideas have entered people's minds which were not there earlier. Earlier, parents

did not think of educating their daughters; with time, that too has changed.

At the school, both men arrived at the same moment with their sons: Manmohan with Ramesh and Mahmood with Rahmat. Before the teacher, both men said that there was already a personal and social relationship between their families, and now that the boys had come to be admitted to school, it was decided that they too should be bound in friendship.

Once the friendship between the two boys had been ormed, they would go to school together and return home together. Vishwanath Babu, the teacher, also understood in his heart what friendship meant in human life. But what Vishwanath Babu understood was understood neither by Manmohan nor by Mahmood. Vishwanath Babu knew that friendship was a bond which brought a sense of oneness in life and death. Manmohan and Mahmood, however, understood friendship simply as a relationship that made two people walk together.

Time moved forward at its own pace. Ramesh and Rahmat both passed the matriculation examination. After passing matriculation, neither of them went on to college. The idea of education that has taken shape in the present age did not exist in the same way earlier. Today, the belief has taken root that the more one studies, the higher the education one receives, the better the job one gets. That idea was not there in former times. In the older way of thinking, a job was not the centre of life. Whatever the family way of life was, whether household farming or trade, parents wished to see their children's lives shaped according to it, and the children too accepted their

parents' way of life and wished to build their own lives in accordance with it.

With the passage of time, Manmohan arranged Ramesh's marriage, and Mahmood arranged Rahmat's marriage. After some time, Ramesh had children, and so did Rahmat.

Just as Ramesh was his father's only son, so too was Rahmat.

A few years later, Manmohan passed away, and so did Mahmood. Yet the relationship that had continued for four generations between the two families did not diminish even in the slightest.

Every day, Ramesh and Rahmat would sit together for an hour or two, talking about the village, society and their own families. If there was any serious illness in Ramesh's family, Rahmat and his wife would involve themselves with heart and soul. In the same way, if there was illness in Rahmat's family, Ramesh and his wife too would be fully involved. Whether there was a need to go to the doctor or to bring medicine from the market, each was always ready for the other. Likewise, in any family work, whether household matters or marriage ceremonies, the two families had always stood by one another.

As time has its own movement, society too has its own course. Sometimes it moves well, and sometimes it moves badly. In Sultanpur too, as in other villages, caste fanaticism first arose. Such caste based conflict in the society is nothing new. It has not appeared only today; it has existed from earlier times. Among human beings, such ill-feeling has always been present: the desire of one caste to rule over another. It would not be right to say that such ill-feeling has existed only between Hindus and Muslims. Just as among Hindus one caste wishes

to dominate another, so among Muslims too one group often wishes to dominate another. Nor is this tendency limited only to one caste against another. It exists within castes as well. Even within a single caste, such an attitude has grown: one lineage, or a few particular families that have advanced economically, try to keep their hold over families that are economically backward.

Then time took a turn. Communal riot gathered force. People of one community began attacking people of another. Such attacks did not take place in one village alone. They took place in most villages. Just as a flame catches from one house to another, so the fire of caste and communal hatred caught from village to village. It caught in Sultanpur too. There is no need here to describe what caste and communal riot is like.

Just as Ramesh carried in his heart the thought of lifelong friendship towards Rahmat, Rahmat too carried the same feeling towards Ramesh. It was not only a matter between two individuals, not merely that Ramesh had affection for Rahmat and Rahmat for Ramesh; every member of both families held the same feeling. But in the society of Sultanpur, another kind of thought had awakened fiercely. Along with this, it so happened that mobile phones had entered almost every household. Out of fear of society, neither was Ramesh going to Rahmat's house, nor was Rahmat coming to Ramesh's house.

Ramesh called Rahmat on the phone and said-

"Rahmat, brother?"

Rahmat replied-

"Yes, Ramesh Bhai."

Ramesh said- "The village, the whole society, is on fire!"

Rahmat said-

“Yes, it is on fire. But such fires last only for a few days. Keep yourself safe. Just as there has always been unfaltering trust between the two of us, so it will remain in the days to come.” ❑

Wayward People

☰

It was the month of Kartik. The time was about eight in the morning. I had to go to Jhanjharpur market, so I had sat down for breakfast. I was thinking that the work to be done at the market was more than the money I had. I was trying to work out how, with the money available, I could reduce the quantity of things and still buy everything according to need. Just then Aparajit arrived. As soon as she came, she stopped at the front door and called out-

"Uncle, Uncle?"

I was sitting on the veranda of the eastern house in my courtyard, having breakfast. My wife had just placed before me a plate of roti and vegetables when I too heard Aparajit's voice and so did my wife. From the voice alone I could not make out that it was Aparajit, but my wife had guessed that it was she. I said to my wife-

"Someone is calling from the front door. Go and see who it is."

As soon as I said this, my wife replied-

"It is probably Aparajit."

Aparajit was the younger daughter of Hiralal Bhai. She

was about fifteen or sixteen years old. I said to my wife-

"Go and tell her that I am having breakfast, so she should come into the courtyard."

My wife went to the front door and said to Aparajit-

"Child, he is having breakfast. Whatever you have to say, go into the courtyard and tell him there."

After my wife said this, Aparajit came from the front door into the courtyard. Seeing me eating on the veranda, she said-

"Uncle, please come to our house for a moment."

Hearing Aparajit, I was caught in a dilemma. I was getting ready to go to the market and meanwhile Aparajit was asking me to come to her house. I said-

"Child, what is the matter that you are asking me to come to your house? I must go to the market and that is why I am eating in great haste."

Aparajit had not spoken openly, and so I had said this. Seeing my wife there, she became hesitant. My wife's presence was the reason for her hesitation. Coming closer, Aparajit whispered-

"Uncle, Father is about to walk out of the house."

Hearing this, I too became confused. On one side, I was preparing to go to the market. On the other, Aparajit was saying that her father was about to walk out of the house, meaning that Hiralal Bhai was ready to leave home. I could not think what I should do. If I did not go to Hiralal Bhai just then and went to the market instead, and if Hiralal Bhai really left in the meantime, what would I do then? On the other hand, I also thought that if I went to Hiralal Bhai and the conversation took long, the market time would pass. I was thinking all this in my

mind and eating hurriedly at the same time. I asked Aparajit-

"Child, why is Hiralal Bhai about to leave home?"

As soon as I asked her, Aparajit said-

"Uncle, I do not know."

By then I had finished eating. I washed my hands, drank some water and said to Aparajit-

"Child, though I am getting ready to go to the market, it is necessary for me to go to your house. So, I shall go there first."

I set off, with Aparajit following behind me. After we had gone a little distance, a thought came to my mind. Perhaps Bhabhi, that is, Ramdulari, Hiralal Bhai's wife, had said something and in anger over that Hiralal Bhai had made up his mind to leave home. So it would be better not to go first to the front door and meet Hiralal Bhai, but to ask Bhabhi first what the matter was. I said to Aparajit-

"Child, take the lane that leads to the courtyard, the lane from the western side. You walk ahead, and I shall follow. That way we shall meet Bhabhi in the courtyard itself. First I shall ask her what has happened to Hiralal Bhai that he is thinking of leaving the house."

As soon as I said this, Aparajit came forward from behind and began to walk ahead, while I followed her through the lane and reached the courtyard. As we entered the courtyard, I saw Ramdulari Bhabhi sitting near the post of the eastern veranda, leaning against it, lost in some thought. The moment she saw me, she rose quickly, came forward and stood before me. I said-

"Bhabhi, why has Bhai Saheb made up his mind to leave the house?"

If Bhabhi had known anything, only then could she have said something; but she knew nothing. She said-

"How would I know what has happened to him?"

I asked-

"Did you say anything to him?"

Bhabhi replied-

"No, I have said nothing to him."

Hearing Bhabhi's words, I fell into uncertainty. I could not make out whether she was hiding something or whether she was truly speaking the truth. But then my own mind said that it would not be right to distrust Bhabhi completely either. So I left the courtyard and took the path towards the front door. As soon as I reached there, I saw Hiralal Bhai sitting on the cot, his head bent, full of anger. Beside him, on the same cot, lay a bag. Seeing the bag, my mind accepted that perhaps Hiralal Bhai had truly made up his mind to leave the house. I went close to him and said-

"Bhai, I have come to meet you."

Why should I have repeated what Aparajit had said? Bhai was so angry that his face had turned pale and drawn. As soon as I spoke, Hiralal Bhai stated-

"Muneshwar, I shall no longer live in this village, in Rohitpur."

By then Ramdulari Bhabhi and Aparajit too had come from the courtyard to the front door. Seeing Bhabhi, I felt a little assured that it was good she had come before him. If there had been any matter between Bhabhi and Hiralal Bhai, the two would have spoken openly to each other then and there. But without making any accusation against his wife, Hiralal Bhai

said-

“Muneshwar, this village is no longer fit to live in. So it would be better for me to leave this place now.”

Hearing Hiralal Bhai, I felt like saying: Bhai, a human being is not a crow or a myna that can fly from one place and begin living somewhere else. A human being is a human being. To live, a person needs not only a house and homestead, but also fields, family and society. But then I felt that it would not be proper to say this. It was possible that some matter, or some feeling of hurt, had made him decide to leave the village. If I spoke in that way at such a moment, it would be like pouring ghee into the fire. So I stated-

“Bhai, is a village divided into parts? It belongs to everyone. Just as it belongs to others, so it belongs to you too. Why then do you allow such a thought to enter your mind?”

I had spoken in the hope that Hiralal Bhai’s thoughts might turn in another direction and that his anger would subside. But his mind was so inflamed against the people of the village that his anger remained exactly as it was. He remarked-

“Muneshwar, man is a social being. Wherever he lives, he has to live in society. But when society itself becomes corrupt, where will a decent man live?”

Wishing to turn Hiralal Bhai’s mind, I added-

“Bhai, even while living in society, even while being a social being, a man still lives by himself. Each person is his own master. Then why are you so angry that you are ready to leave the village itself?”

Hearing my words, Hiralal Bhai’s mind did pause a little, but the colour of his face remained just as it had been before.

He replied-

"Muneshwar, This is the very village that once was something entirely different, and look what it has become now. Where have the thoughts and deeds of our fathers and grandfathers gone?"

I could not quite understand what Hiralal Bhai meant, so I responded-

"What do you mean, Bhai?"

Hiralal Bhai replied-

"Muneshwar, I am speaking of the conduct of each and every man in society. Listen carefully and think carefully too."

As Hiralal Bhai said this, I too prepared myself to listen and reflect. Seeing me become attentive, Hiralal Bhai stated-

"Muneshwar, this much you too understand, do you not, that a man's soul is his true master?"

Seeing the flow of Hiralal Bhai's thought, I nodded-

"Yes, that is true."

Hiralal Bhai continued-

"Then tell me, do people not kill their own souls day and night?"

Listening to Hiralal Bhai's troubled thought, I was caught in uncertainty. What he was saying was true and yet, at this old age, for him to leave his village and family and go somewhere else would not be right either. So, in order to turn the thought aside, I responded-

"Bhai Saheb, your thought cannot be denied, but if you leave your family and go away, what will become of them?"

As though Hiralal Bhai had already thought through

everything, he replied at once-

"I have told everyone, every member of the family, that they too should come with me. To live even for a day in such a village would be like living in hell. But only if the family members understand this, will it happen, will it not?"

Hearing Hiralal Bhai, I felt that his anger towards the village had gone very deep. Yet since I had come there, what would it mean if even then Hiralal Bhai did not listen and left the village? So it was necessary to know every thread, every single thread, of the reason behind his anger. As he spoke of each reason, I would go on answering it, so that some change might begin in his mind and, in the end, his thought might shift. I asked-

"Bhai Saheb, what is the reason that your heart has become so detached from the village?"

Hiralal Bhai answered-

"Muneshwar, I shall tell you about the ways of each person, the conduct of each man in the village."

Hearing Hiralal Bhai's words, I made myself fully alert, so that I could understand each of his thoughts deeply and then try to answer them, until at last his mind might change. I asked-

"Bhai Saheb, what has made your heart so full of disgust for the village?" Hiralal Bhai responded-

"I am not speaking of something from long ago. I am speaking of what happened yesterday. You know Ruplal, don't you?"

Ruplal was from Rohitpur. He regarded himself as a follower of the Nirgun path, that is, of the Kabir Panth. I stated-

"Why would I not know him? Is he some stranger from

another village, or someone unknown, that I would not know him?"

Hiralal Bhai continued-

"You see him, don't you, sitting with the khajuri, playing it and singing all kinds of devotional songs of Kabir Das? And how he sways while singing. It seems as though the thought that Kabir Das expresses through his lines is being sung by Ruplal from the heart. But let me tell you about his conduct. This happened the day before yesterday. I had gone to Jitan's tea shop to take tea. Ruplal too had returned after eating at a community feast and was sitting there. Rahuawali came to the shop with her grandson and said to Ruplal, 'Mahatmaji, please look at this child. We do not neglect his food and drink in any way and yet he is growing thinner day by day. Why is this happening?' At this, Ruplal said- 'I shall give you an amulet. Tie it in a thread and put it round his neck. From the moment you make him wear this amulet, he will begin to recover from his illness. He will become well within fifteen days. Then Rahuawali asked, 'Will there be a charge for the amulet?' Nodding his head, Ruplal replied- 'Yes. Others usually take fifty rupees for such an amulet, but I shall take only twenty.' Rahuawali went home, brought twenty rupees, gave it to Ruplal and bought the amulet. Now you tell me, if saints and holy men behave in this way, what will become of the village and society?"

I myself see such games day and night with my own eyes, so there was no question of disbelief. I stated-

"Bhai Saheb, that is a matter between Ruplal Das and Rahuawali. Why should you become so angry over it? As one acts, so one shall receive."

Hiralal Bhai replied-

"That was Ruplal's conduct. Now listen to Kishunlal's. You must remember him too. Until last year he was a follower of Gorakhnath. He would take a sarangi and sing songs and devotional verses of Gorakhnath and he also called himself a disciple of Guru Gorakhnath. And what do you see this year? You see him, don't you? He has had a booklet printed, has put on robes of a single colour, and, on the false pretext of building a temple of Hanumanji, is raising a large amount of money from people. Is he not doing that?"

I had seen it with my own eyes, so I uttered-

"Bhai Saheb, as the saying goes, each person acts for himself and bears the result himself. Then why trouble yourself unnecessarily? Each person is his own master. As one acts, so one shall receive. Leave aside the affairs of the world. Think of how you yourself can live in peace and act accordingly."

Hearing my words, Hiralal Bhai's mind seemed to calm down a little, though not completely. He voiced-

"Do you not see the people of the village? In the last election, the election held five years ago, which party did they vote for, and this time how have they all changed and gone over to another party? Where thought itself keeps wavering, what kind of political power can there be?"

Hiralal Bhai's thought seemed entirely true to me, but I had come to calm him down and persuade him to stay. So I suggested-

"Bhai Saheb, why do you trouble yourself so much over the morals and manners of the people of the village? Do you have faith in me or not?"

All at once, Hiralal Bhai's mind grew calm. As soon as he regained composure, he uttered-

"Muneshwar, you are the only person in the village who stands by his own thought and also regards a human being as a human being. So, what is your view?"

I responded-

"Bhai Saheb, if someone says that a crow has flown away with your ear, do not run after the crow for nothing; first touch your own ear and see. The village belongs to everyone and it will remain everyone's village. Carry forward the family built by your father and forefathers in keeping with its own values. To leave the village unnecessarily after seeing other people's conduct is not right."

Hiralal Bhai stated-

"I accept your suggestions." ❑

The Ghost

☰

In the forest of life there lived a sage. Just as every tree in a vast forest of countless trees retains its own identity through its unique nature and qualities, so too did that sage. In this vast world, crowded with millions and billions of human beings, he preserved his individuality in his own distinctive way. The thought that time is powerful, that the power of time is like the power of the divine, was deeply rooted in his heart. Therefore he made his life disciplined and remained engaged in his regular duties. He did have a family, but apart from his wife there was no one in it.

Just as night is part of the natural rhythm of life, the nights in that sage's life were no different from his days. He did not treat the night as night, but used it as he used the day. His wife was like Lakshmi herself, and so the family worries that trouble most people did not trouble him much. His mind had reached the point where he saw no difference between one human being and another. Here, 'human beings' refers to all people, regardless of gender, caste, or community.

In the forest, that is, in life, millions and millions of trees of different colours and kinds preserve their identity through their branches, leaves, flowers and fruits. By their qualities and

nature, each keeps its own distinct identity, so that one who sees and understands can recognise which tree bears which flower or fruit. Accordingly, each has its own name, distinct from the rest. In the same way, the sage had recognised his own life, fixed his own duty, and remained engaged in it.

According to his duty, he remained constantly absorbed in his work. In the forest where he lived, there was also a ghost. Whenever the sage went away to bathe or meditate, the place would be left empty. Seizing the opportunity, the ghost would appear in his absence. It would lift the scriptures and sacred books from their place and scatter them here and there. When the sage returned, he would find that not a single book or manuscript was in its proper place.

Seeing that the books and manuscripts were not where they belonged, the sage would come out of his hut and look all around. Finding them scattered here and there, he would gather them one by one, bring them back, and place them again exactly where he kept them every day. This was not a game of one day; it happened every day. At last, tired of it, he called the ghost and asked-

"Why do you do this every day?"

As soon as Sushant, the serene sage, asked this, the ghost named Kukant replied-

"You remain busy day and night with your own work. I have no work at all. Then what am I to do?"

Hearing the ghost's thought, Sushant Rishi reflected within himself. I am in the form of a living soul, therefore, having seen and recognized life, I remain engaged in my duty. But he is a ghost, one whose very life has been lost. It would be better to show him such a task in life, and place such a

burden upon him, that he would neither be able to finish the task nor have time left to create mischief. Thinking this, the sage decided that until he planted in the ghost's mind the ghost of work, the ghost of duty, the ghost would not allow him to live in peace. The sage replied to the ghost-

"Listen, you are my neighbour. Seeing your conduct, I too feel sorrow. So I shall give you a thought. Will you follow it?"

Hearing the sage's proposal, the ghost said-

"That is what I want."

Pointing with the finger of his right hand towards a mango tree standing a little away from the hut, Sushant Rishi responded-

"Get ready from this very moment. Go, climb that tree right up to the topmost branch, and from there come down again to the ground. Then climb up once more. I have shown you your work for day and night."

In his mind, the sage had already understood that the tree of life is such a tree that however many people climb it, its end will never be reached. Life is life. Just as in a family a cook prepares pieces of fish according to the family's need, adds water, makes curry, and people eat it with satisfaction, so too is the work of life. It is work that gives human beings fulfilment. Therefore, what is needed is to set the ghost of work within one's own thought. ❑

Self-Belief

Trust is in itself a great quality. But how can such a quality be created in the human mind? Everyone knows how vast the world is and how many people live in it. It cannot be said with certainty how many people there are in the world, for everyone knows that at every moment human beings are born, that is, they come upon this earth, and at every moment there is death too, that is, they depart from it. In such a situation, how can anything be stated exactly? At best, one may count the population of each country, for the world is divided into many countries, and on that basis make an estimate of the number of human beings in the world. There is, of course, an old saying that every day one hundred thousand people die and one hundred and twenty-five thousand are born, but such a saying has no firm basis. In the matter of death, we see many natural calamities in which hundreds of thousands of people die. Along with this, there are countless diseases and ailments too, from which people suffer and die. The present scientific age has become such that, on one side, many means have been developed to protect life, while on the other, such destructive instruments have also been created that can bring about destruction. Whatever may be the case, that is a matter

concerning the world. The question is: how will self-belief awaken in every human being?

Such a thought always arose in Harekrishna's mind. How could he awaken self-belief within himself? The question did arise in his mind, but he could not find an answer to how his self-belief would awaken by itself. And how could he find an answer? His understanding was limited by his ordinary social background and modest education and because of this he could not develop faith in himself. On one side, he was only modestly educated; on the other, because his life itself was ordinary, his intellectual level too remained low.

Sitting alone at the front of the house, Harekrishna thought within himself that this was not a habit formed only today. Since childhood, he had formed the habit of doing whatever he did, or thinking whatever he thought, by watching other people, that is, the people of society. He simply followed the ways of the people around him. But until now, the belief had never arisen in his mind that what he did was different from the thought of society, different from merely following others. As he saw people doing, so he too did. Yet the result of action is sometimes good and sometimes bad. This thought had been arising in his mind not only today, but from long ago. What ought to happen is this: when one has been born as a human being, and when a human being is considered a thinking and discerning being, why should the result of action not always be good? Why should it turn bad? Like bubbles in the rainwater of *Sawan*, thoughts rose in Harekrishna's mind by themselves and burst by themselves. At last, Harekrishna thought that if he could not find the answer to a question himself, why should he not ask someone else and understand it? Then another thought arose in his mind: if, just as he himself did not understand, the

other person also did not understand, and yet, on hearing the question, gave some answer, would it not be the same as before? Just as the result of action done by one's own thought may be good or may be bad, would it not be the same then too? People have also formed the habit that if they are asked something, they will surely give some answer or other. That answer may seem good to him, but when he acts according to it, that is, according to another person's thought, then just as the result of work done by his own mind may be good or bad, so too it may be good or bad even then.

Lost in thought, Harekrishna could not bring himself to believe that work done entirely according to his own thinking would always turn out well. While he remained in this uncertainty, a thought arose in his mind: it would be better not to ask the same question of only one person, but to ask a second, a third, and even a fourth. Then either the same answer would come from all, or different answers would come. If the same answer came, he would place greater faith in it. If different answers came, he would examine them through his own thought, weighing and testing the replies received from others and then arrive at a certain point. And when that thought was put into action, the good or bad result of the action would also come before him. Once it was put into practice, he would accept whatever proved right; and whatever did not, he would identify where and how the mistake had occurred and correct it.

Thinking in this way, Harekrishna's mind reached the point where he felt that until he had asked someone else and understood any question, any thought related to a piece of work, it would remain merely his own thought and from that the result might be good or might certainly turn bad. All at

once, a sense of relief came to his mind. With that relief came the thought that Karyanand Kaka, both in the eyes of the village people and in his own eyes, was the finest man in society in terms of his conduct and way of life. Why should he not go to him, put all his questions to him, and act according to his answers? That way, the possibility of things going wrong would end. Harekrishna's inner mind accepted that he would do something only after asking Karyanand Kaka.

As it happened, Karyanand Kaka was going to the market on some family work. Seeing Karyanand Kaka coming along the road, Harekrishna rose from the front of his house and came out to stand on the road. When Karyanand Kaka had come a little closer, Harekrishna said from ahead-

"Kaka, I touch your feet."

Harekrishna was not unknown to Karyanand Kaka. Giving him his blessing, Karyanand Kaka said-

"Be well, Harekrishna. How is everything at home?"

Harekrishna replied-

"How can things be at home, Kaka? I always keep thinking how the family may run well, but the more I think of running it well, the more things go wrong."

Hearing Harekrishna's words, Karyanand Kaka felt a little pleased and a little sad. He was pleased because, unlike others, Harekrishna had not falsely praised his own family. He was sad because when the condition of a person's family itself becomes disturbed, how can peace come into that family? And when there is no peace, how can that family run calmly? Karyanand Kaka said- "What do you mean, Harekrishna?"

Harekrishna answered- "Kaka, I think of one thing, and

something else happens altogether."

Karyanand Kaka responded- "This is a matter of family discussion, a matter that needs thought and conversation. It cannot be dealt with while standing here. I too am now going to the market for family work. After I return, we shall sit peacefully in the evening and talk."

The curiosity in Harekrishna's mind had become so intense that he felt restless to know when he would receive the right answer, so that he might take the right path and move ahead. Then all his work would turn out well. Harekrishna stated- "Kaka, I shall come to the market with you. Once we reach the market, you will do your errands there. But while going and returning, there will be no other work on the road; during that time the two of us can talk."

Harekrishna's thought seemed reasonable to Karyanand Kaka. Such a thing was certainly possible. But if Harekrishna had some family work at that moment, it would surely be delayed. Then, at once, another thought came to him: since Harekrishna himself was ready to go, it would not be proper to stop him either. Karyanand Kaka suggested-

"Harekrishna, if you are free, you may come. But if some work will be held up because you go now, why should you go? I have already told you that in the evening, when we are at ease, both of us shall sit together, and I shall answer whatever questions you have."

Harekrishna uttered- "Kaka, my mind has become so restless that I cannot give attention to any work."

Karyanand Kaka stated- "Then come."

The two of them set out together. After they had walked

a few steps, Harekrishna uttered-

"Kaka, I do one thing, and something else happens. I act thinking that this is needed in the family, but because the work goes wrong, the need is not fulfilled; instead, another problem grows."

Hearing Harekrishna's words, Karyanand Kaka felt that such a thing did not happen to Harekrishna alone; it happened to many people. We see that people work throughout the day and yet receive a poor result. Karyanand Kaka said-

"Harekrishna, first of all, before doing any work, sit with attention and think in your mind what has to be done today. What are the tasks for the day? After that, think which work should be done first and which should be done later. Of course, work is work, and every task has its own importance. But one must see which work has the right time now, and which work may be done later without causing any harm. Work should be done accordingly."

Hearing Karyanand Kaka's thought, Harekrishna reflected within himself and realized that he did indeed make mistakes in this very matter, in relation to work. He had no proper sense of time, nor any proper order of work. Therefore, even the work he understood, even the work he knew how to do, gave a poor result when it was done without regard to the right time. It also happens that one task itself spoils another. He would do something that was not immediately needed, and the work that was needed would be left undone. Harekrishna asked-

"How should I do that, Kaka?"

Karyanand Kaka replied-

"Harekrishna, the work that stands first in priority should

be done first. For this, inner strength must be awakened, that is, the strength of the self and the strength of thought. The Manipura chakra, the centre of inner energy active within the body, must first be awakened. If that awakens, you will feel that there is no work in this world which a human being cannot do. When such power begins to move within the mind, your power to work will grow so strong that you will feel like leaving aside food, drink and sleep, and devoting yourself to work alone. Work itself is life. As you work, and as much as you work, so too will your life be shaped."

Talking as they went, the two of them reached the market. Leaving the conversation aside, Karyanand Kaka began to do his errands there. He worked out in his mind the cost of the things he had to buy and then began buying them. A buyer who does not know the price or value of an item, and bargains too much over it, takes more time. But why should a buyer who does not bargain unnecessarily take much time? Yes, if there is doubt that the shopkeeper is asking more than the proper price, the right thing is to ask other shopkeepers about the price of that item. If the price appears to be the same everywhere, the mind accepts that this is the current value of that particular thing, that its price is in keeping with the time. Karyanand Kaka had to buy only four or five things, so it did not take him much time. Harekrishna was quietly watching Karyanand Kaka's conduct and also thinking within himself that to buy the same number of things, he himself would have taken twice or three times as long. More time would have been wasted and the work done would have been no more than what could have been done in less time.

After buying everything and putting it in the bag, Karyanand Kaka said to Harekrishna- "Harekrishna, the market

errands are done. Now let us go."

Karyanand Kaka walked ahead and Harekrishna followed. As soon as they came out of the market, Harekrishna said to Karyanand Kaka-

"Kaka, give me the bag. I shall carry it."

Karyanand Kaka said-

"Harekrishna, if the things in the bag had been heavy, I could have given it to you. But since they are not heavy, why should I not carry it myself? Always remember this: whatever work one has to do oneself, one should do oneself. That keeps the habit of work alive at all times. If you do not do this and get your work done by others, then one day such a time comes when your own strength to work is taken away."

Hearing Karyanand Kaka's thought, Harekrishna began to reflect within himself. He realized that this shortcoming existed in him too, though he said nothing. By then both of them had come out of the market. Karyanand Kaka stated -

"Harekrishna, when a person develops faith in himself, he becomes fearless. And to become free from fear is necessary for every human being. Many kinds of fear remain filled within a person in such a way that he cannot become fearless."

In the middle of this, Harekrishna asked-

"Why does such fear remain filled within a human being?"

Karyanand Kaka answered-

"First, the social environment has become such that people remain frightened all the time. Secondly, the old impressions within them, the old habits and conditioning, also remain a powerful cause in life."

Harekrishna uttered-

“Then what?”

Karyanand Kaka replied-

“By serving and helping those in need, love awakens in the human heart. Once love for fellow human beings awakens in a person, the spirit of service also arises. And when love awakens among people, they begin to help one another. As a result, the welfare of all is promoted and the bitterness between people gradually disappears. Once that happens, once bitterness among human beings is removed, the doubt and fear about the safety of one’s own life will also disappear.”

Talking as they walked, the two of them drew near the house. As soon as they reached it, Harekrishna expressed his feelings-

“Kaka, it feels as though the mist in my mind is beginning to clear.” ❑

Courtesy

☰

There is a saying: where there is money, the dance grows livelier. Yet it is also true that where there are many poets and people of letters, the dance too is not absent. That also happens. From ancient times, the land of Mithila has produced poets and literary people; it does so even now, and it will continue to do so in the future. Ancient Mithila, which was once understood within a fixed geographical boundary, has now expanded. Why speak only of the country, of India? Maithils, the people of Mithila, have gone so far in search of employment and livelihood that they are spread across every corner of the country and have reached other countries as well. Whenever people of the same soil and water gather in one place, they naturally try to establish their language, literature, culture and way of conduct.

The Maithil society organised a programme of language and literature in Delhi. A three-day programme was planned. Along with local Maithili writers living in Delhi, Maithili writers from Mithila were also invited. Ramsevak Bhai too was invited to that programme. Ramsevak Bhai was neither a lyricist nor a singer, but having written stories, novels and poems, he was certainly regarded as a short-story writer, a novelist and a poet. His train tickets to Delhi and back were

also sent to him five days before the programme. On one side there was the attraction of a literary gathering, and on the other the joy of seeing the advancements of language and literature. Ramsevak Bhai gladly made up his mind to take part in the programme. The circumstances too turned out well. By happy coincidence, the ticket of a companion who was to travel with him also arrived. The ticket was for reaching Delhi one day before the programme, and the return ticket was for the day after the programme ended.

The railway department has certainly improved somewhat in comparison with earlier times. Where one once had to change trains at three or four places to go to Delhi, it has now become easier to reach Delhi by taking a single train. Ramsevak Bhai reached Delhi five hours before the literary and cultural programme was to begin. As he was elderly, he was naturally tired, for he had spent twenty-four or twenty-five hours in the train. Yet the enthusiasm in his mind had risen so much that he did not feel the tiredness as tiredness.

The organisers had made such arrangements that no one should face any kind of inconvenience. On reaching the venue in Delhi, Ramsevak Bhai first took a bath. In any case, bathing reduces fatigue; and after that, when he met many new people, and also some people whom he had met after ten or twenty years, his mental fatigue disappeared completely.

The three-day programme was divided into six sessions, two sessions each day. On the first day, the first session was on the history of Mithila, and the second on the geographical structure of Mithila. On the second day, the subjects were the philosophy of life in Mithila and the society of Mithila. On the third day, the subjects were the art of Mithila and Mithila's

cultural songs and dances.

Many relatives and acquaintances, as well as people from his own neighbourhood and surrounding areas, came to meet Ramsevak Bhai. They sat with him for hours and remained in his company.

According to the schedule, Ramsevak Bhai attended all the sessions. The programme went well, and the Maithil society decided among themselves that they would organise such a programme every year.

After the programme ended, Ramsevak Bhai caught the train back to his village. He reached the village at the appointed time.

Eight days after the programme, Sukdev, a relative by marriage, called from Delhi. Sukdev was the brother-in-law of Ramsevak Bhai's nephew, Ramkhelawan. Ramkhelawan had married Sukdev's sister; in that way, Sukdev's sister was Ramkhelawan's wife and belonged to Ramsevak Bhai's extended family. Sukdev had not attended the programme.

Fifteen years earlier, Sukdev had gone to Delhi. He was hardly educated; he could do little more than write his name and village. But just as he was strong and well-built in body, he was also energetic in work. He had learnt driving. After leaving the village, Sukdev began driving for a businessman. The Seth, that is, the businessman, had several vehicles. It is often the case that wealthy people keep several vehicles for dealing with different persons and different kinds of work. Six months after starting the job, Sukdev, having proved himself a good driver, became the driver of the vehicle that the Seth used personally. Since he became the personal driver of the head of the household, Sukdev received more regard and respect than the

other drivers. The Seth was, after all, a man of money. Because of this, Sukdev's income also became greater than that of the other drivers.

In any case, a certain trend had grown. It cannot be said of everyone, but it is certainly true that most people who have gone from the village to Delhi or to other cities for work have either bought a house there or built one. Sukdev too had bought one *katha* of land and built a two-storeyed house of his own.

Eight days after Ramsevak Bhai returned to the village, Sukdev telephoned. The age of mobile phones had already arrived. Mobile phones had reached person after person. As it happened, Sukdev did not know Ramsevak Bhai's mobile number, so he called Ramsevak Bhai's nephew. The nephew, Ramkhelawan, was not at home; he had gone to Madhubani. So Ramkhelawan said to Sukdev-

"I am in Madhubani at the moment. If you wish, I can give you chachaji's mobile number. Otherwise, when I return home, I shall make you speak to him."

When someone has newly risen from poverty, a certain excitement often grows in him. In that very excitement, Sukdev said to Ramkhelawan-

"Ramsevak Kaka came to Delhi, and he did not come to meet me!"

Hearing Sukdev's words, Ramkhelawan said nothing. He hang up the call and got on with his work. In the evening, Ramkhelawan returned home from Madhubani. Tired from the whole day, he first bathed and had something to eat. After eating, when his mind became settled, he thought that he should now tell chachaji what Sukdev had said. He did exactly that.

Ramsevak Bhai was sitting at the front of the house,

talking to Anuplal about the Delhi programme. As soon as he saw Ramkhelawan, Ramsevak Bhai asked him-

"Did your court work get done?"

Ramkhelawan replied-

"Yes."

Hearing this from Ramkhelawan, Ramsevak Bhai asked nothing further and again began talking to Anuplal. In the meantime, Ramkhelawan said-

"Chachaji, while I was doing the court work, Sukdev said on the phone that Ramsevak Chacha came to Delhi and did not meet him."

As soon as Ramsevak Bhai heard Sukdev's message from Ramkhelawan, it was as though his whole body caught fire. Anger rose in him so fiercely that if Sukdev had been before him, he would have grabbed him by the throat then and there. But Sukdev was not before him, not in Ramsevak Bhai's presence. So, just as Mahadev swallowed the poison after the churning of the ocean, Ramsevak Bhai swallowed the poison of anger within his own mind. Yet just as the heat of the poison had spread within Mahadev, so too the heat of anger kept burning within Ramsevak Bhai. He said to Anuplal-

"Anup, people can be shameless beyond measure!"

Had Anuplal understood anything, he might have said something in reply. But he had not understood, and so, with curiosity, he asked-

"What is the matter, Bhai?"

Although an immense flame of anger was blazing within Ramsevak Bhai's mind, the person against whom that flame had risen was not before him. Suppressing the fire within

himself, Ramsevak Bhai said-

"Anup, you may not know the person Ramkhelawan spoke about, so let me first tell you who he is. He, that is Sukdev, is Ramkhelawan's brother-in-law. As for education, he is almost equal to zero. He can do little more than write his name and village. In the village he used to wander about aimlessly. He went to Delhi with his maternal cousin. That cousin, at his own expense, taught him driving, how to drive a vehicle. Now he works as a driver at the house of a big businessman. You see how times have changed. The very theft and dishonesty that people once considered sin, and still call sin, has now come to be treated almost as *dharma*. Hardly anyone remains untouched by this sin. By the strength of that so-called *dharma*, in truth by the strength of *adharma*, Sukdev has built a two-storeyed house in Delhi. It has ten rooms. He and his wife live in one room, and he has rented out all the others. From that he earns twenty-five to thirty thousand rupees a month. He has a good income. First there is his salary from the job, second, his unofficial income, and third, the rent from the house. When a family has lived all its life in want, in poverty, and then money begins to come in, the mind is bound to turn upside down. The same has happened to Sukdev."

While speaking, Ramsevak Bhai told Anuplal everything, but the heat that had risen in his mind remained burning within him. He said to Ramkhelawan-

"Son, just call Sukdev for me."

As soon as Ramsevak Bhai said this, Ramkhelawan called Sukdev and said-

"I have come home. Speak to Chachaji."

Had Sukdev understood, it would have been different;

but he did not know that Chachaji was burning with anger on hearing his words. He said-

"Chachaji, you came to Delhi and did not come to my place!"

As soon as Sukdev said this, Ramsevak Bhai replied-

"Son, do you understand what courtesy means?"

Had Sukdev been educated, he might have said something about courtesy. But he was not, and so he said nothing. Just as a householder whose house has been robbed burns with anger when the thief is caught, so it happened to Ramsevak Bhai. He had already been angry with Sukdev, and now, when Sukdev came directly before him, even if only on the phone, his anger rose further. He said-

"Sukdev, have you not yet gained even this much sense, that you could understand that I had gone from the village to Delhi for a public programme? A time had been fixed there. I had to reach according to that time and take part in the programme. What are you saying in such a situation? Do you not feel even this much shame? Since I had reached there, you must have known about it, for the programme had been well publicised. You should have come there and met me."

A person's thoughts and behaviour are shaped according to his level of understanding. Sukdev spoke according to the level of understanding he had. He said-

"Chachaji, I could not come because I had no time."

As soon as Ramsevak Bhai heard this, his anger flared like the fierce power of Narasimha. He stated-

"At this age, I travelled so far from the village to take part in the programme, and you, who were nearby, could not come."

By this time, Ramsevak Bhai had begun to understand what true courtesy meant and how it shaped a person's character. He had come to see that when a person learns to be courteous, a quiet inner strength awakens within them, almost like a divine gift. But he chose not to say any of this aloud, knowing that his words would like be casting pearls before swine.

Sukdev said-

“Chachaji, what shall I say to you? You yourself know what the life of one who depends on others is like.”

Hearing Sukdev’s words, the volcano that had already erupted in Ramsevak Bhai’s mind suddenly grew calm on recognising the helplessness of a dependent man. Yet, hearing Sukdev’s insolent words, a little pain still remained in his heart. He said-

“Son Sukdev, to sleep on straw while dreaming of nine lakhs, remove such dreams from your mind. Try to learn how one should behave with different kinds of people.”

Hearing Ramsevak Bhai’s words, Sukdev felt as though a great weight of cold water had been poured over him. His voice began to tremble. Shaking, he said-

“Chachaji, what shall I say to you? A mistake has been made.”

Ramsevak Bhai didn’t say anything. ❑

The Contest of Life

☰

Competition has become a defining feature of the present age. Wherever one looks, wherever one goes, there is competition. From one person to another, and from nation to nation across the world, everyone is engaged in some competitions of their own. A time has come when competition is everywhere. One person competes with another, one family with another, one caste with another, one community with another and even one society with another."

Having failed twice in the competitive examination for administrative service, Ramkishore had become disheartened. Sitting alone at the front of his house, he thought within himself that either he was not suited to the times, or the times were not suited to him. Ramkishore, who passed his B.A., also thought that the time for a government job had already slipped away. His age had crossed the limit for ordinary employment and what remained was the administrative service examination, in which one could appear three times. Even there, he had failed twice. One chance was left and most likely he would fail in that too. If he failed all three times, his long-cherished dream of an administrative career would be lost forever. What would he do then?

It was true that the family owned fifteen *bighas* of land, but farming as an occupation had almost reached a point of collapse. On one side, there was no proper arrangement for agriculture; on the other, for educated people, farming had become almost an object of ridicule. Agriculture, which is the main pillar of the economic foundation of the country, was being looked down upon both by farmers themselves and by the government. In such a situation, what could he do?

Ramkishore had become so disappointed with his life that the very idea of the future was being erased from his mind. He could see no hope ahead, nor could he see any proper shape for his own life. When Ramkishore lifted his eyes from himself and turned them towards society, he saw the same kind of picture there as he saw within himself. All at once, a new thought arose in his mind. The thought was this: why should he not try to understand from someone else the things he himself could not understand? But when Ramkishore looked at the world around him, he felt that people were no better. Instead of showing someone the right path, they were quick to lead him astray. They thought wrongly, and given the chance, they did wrongly too. When such a nature had entered the people of society, how much hope for good could be placed in that society?

Suddenly, a finer perception came to Ramkishore. Society is indeed a group, but within that group everyone's nature and thought are not of the same kind. It is true that some people are certainly wicked by nature, but it cannot be said that everyone is the same. There are people of bad nature, yes. Yet one thing cannot be denied. Those of good nature live with restraint. They keep themselves under control and order their lives accordingly. The wicked, however, move among people throughout the day. By their thoughts and by their actions, they

keep doing harm in one way or another.

Thinking and reflecting in this way, Ramkishore's mind reached a point where he began to see the people of good nature.

All at once, Ramkishore's attention turned to Gaurinath Master Saheb. Gaurinath Master Saheb had been a high school teacher and retired six years earlier. He had made his family so stable that, unlike others, he did not carry even the slightest worry in his mind. Just as the conduct of his family was well balanced, the lives of all its members were also well ordered.

Thinking about Gaurinath Master Saheb, Ramkishore came to the decision that he would go to him and tell him everything. After listening to him, whatever view Master Saheb offered, he would hear it and then consider for himself how useful that thought was for life, and how much of it might not be useful. After all, he too was a graduate; he was not entirely like someone who had never seen a school or college. Ramkishore's mind accepted that he would go to him in the evening, tell him everything and ask what it would be best to do next.

"From the moment the thought of meeting Gaurinath Master Saheb arose in Ramkishore's mind, he became thoughtful. He began to examine the many knots in his life, one by one. He carefully considered which of them it would be proper to place before the Master."

The sun had set. Most of the thoughts concerning life had already awakened in Ramkishore's mind. All at once, a thought struck him. Whatever thoughts had arisen in his mind so far had arisen from his own understanding of things. He had looked at everything only from the standpoint he had held until now. But

once he began talking to Gaurinath Master Saheb, things might appear differently. Some of his doubts might clear up on their own, and new ideas might arise in their place. He might begin to see matters in an altogether new light. Without saying anything to anyone else in the family, Ramkishore said to his wife-

"I am going to Gaurinath Master Saheb's house. In the course of conversation, I may be a little late, so do not worry in any way."

As soon as Ramkishore said this to his wife, she too said-

"Do not be too late. It is night-time, so try to return on time."

Hearing his wife's words, Ramkishore said nothing more. He rose from the front of the house and set out.

Gaurinath Master Saheb had three sons and two daughters. Both daughters lived in their husbands' homes, but Gaurinath kept with him the two children of each daughter, one son and one daughter from each, and educated them himself. All four were studying in high school. Gaurinath's eldest son, lived in the village. He looked after everything there—the farming, the fields, the relatives, the kinfolk, and the affairs of the community. The two younger sons lived outside with their own families.

Gaurinath Master Saheb was sitting at the front of the house, talking to his eldest son, Shobhit, who lived in the village, when Ramkishore arrived. As soon as Ramkishore reached the front of the house, he said- "Kaka, I touch your feet." Gaurinath Master Saheb replied- "Come, come, Ramkishore."

On the veranda at the front of the house, a bedding was

spread on a large cot, on which seven or eight people could sit comfortably. Gaurinath Master Saheb was sitting there, talking to Shobhit. Seating Ramkishore beside him on the same cot, Gaurinath asked-

"How is everything at home, Ramkishore?"

Ramkishore replied-

"Everything at home is very well, but I myself am unsettled."

A conflict arose in Gaurinath Master Saheb's mind. The conflict was that Ramkishore saw the family as something separate from himself. But he did not say this. He only suggested-

"It is a family, after all. Everyone is not of the same kind, nor is everyone's life of one kind. Even within a family there are lives of many different colours."

Hearing Gaurinath Master Saheb's thought, Ramkishore reflected within himself that it was evening and slowly the night would keep advancing. It would be better, therefore, to speak about the very matter for which he had come. Otherwise, the time would pass and the main subject would remain untouched. Thinking this, Ramkishore said-

"Kaka, I have come to discuss something."

Hearing this, Gaurinath Master Saheb said-

"Then surely you will tell me what you have come to discuss."

Ramkishore expressed -

"Kaka, nothing that I have thought of doing in life so far has succeeded. Now I feel that if things go on like this, life itself will become useless."

Hearing Ramkishore's words, Gaurinath Master Saheb thought within himself that this was a suitable moment. It was suitable because as long as a person's own ideas remain strong and active, he does not wish to accept another person's thought, however good or suitable it may be. But when one fails through one's own thinking, one becomes ready to listen to and accept the thought of another. Therefore, Ramkishore's present condition was suitable for such understanding. Gaurinath Master Saheb said-

"Ramkishore, you are not the only person who is failing. Understand that most people in society are like this. Only when you know yourself properly and take a step in the right direction will you find hope in life."

Hearing Gaurinath Master Saheb's words, a new thought awakened in Ramkishore's mind. As soon as that awakening came, he said-

"How will that happen, Kaka?"

Gaurinath Master Saheb suggested -

"Ramkishore, people are often such that they keep comparing themselves with others all the time. Because of this, they fail to attain what they truly need. This is the world. There are many who are better than the good, and there are many who are worse than the bad. For this reason, people are unable to know their own true measure, unable to understand what they themselves are. What is needed is to know, properly and deeply, what one is. The moment a person begins to know himself, he will be able to know his life. The moment he understands his life, that is, his actions and his purpose, he will begin to move in a new direction, and self-knowledge will also begin to awaken in him. When self-knowledge begins to

awaken, he will become focused. The more focused he becomes in studying himself, the stronger his self-awareness will grow. That is the first step towards success in life."

Hearing Gaurinath Master Saheb's words, such a seed of thought fell into Ramkishore's mind as had never fallen there in his life before. The body is like the earth. Just as the kind of seed one puts into the earth gives birth to that kind of plant or tree, so it is with the human mind and life. Ramkishore said-

"Kaka, how shall I understand that?"

Gaurinath Master Saheb advised-

"Ramkishore, every day of life, and every single moment of the day, is divine in its nature. What is needed is to recognise it. You must examine how your time passed through the day, in which tasks it was spent, how much of that time was spent on meaningful new work, and how much was spent in ordinary practical activities. The time that you give to meaningful new work is the very time in which you climb the steps of success in life."

Letting out a long breath, Ramkishore said-

"Kaka, how shall I examine that?"

Hearing Ramkishore's question, Gaurinath Master Saheb smiled with inner happiness. Smiling, he responded-

"Ramkishore, when you are satisfied with your work and happiness comes into your mind, understand then that you are climbing the steps of success. Every day, every moment, a human being moves through success and failure, though not everyone is able to understand this. The one who gains the knowledge to understand it, the one who learns how to experience success and failure, can understand his own success

and failure. The moment you begin to understand this, you will also begin to understand how much success you gained that day, and how much failure you met."

Ramkishore could not understand Gaurinath Master Saheb's thought clearly, so he asked-

"Please explain it a little more clearly, Kaka."

Gaurinath Master Saheb replied-

"Ramkishore, leave aside the way you and others keep looking towards the world all day. You see for yourself that the person who looks at his own path, the path on which he has to walk, and then takes his steps, completes his journey. But the one who walks on the road while looking towards the sky or towards some other thing strikes his foot against a stone and falls. The moment you walk on your path while recognising and knowing yourself, there will be neither the possibility of falling nor of stumbling. Everyone knows, and you too should know, that within the human body there is mind, there is intellect, there is discernment, and there is also the soul. When you keep your attention on these, on mind, intellect, discernment and soul, and then do any work or form any thought, fulfilment will enter your mind. That fulfilment itself is success. The moment you begin to live in such a way, your capacity will also begin to grow, and the happiness of your mind will also increase. Until you attain this, the desire to take something from others will always remain awake within you. Asking something from another person is not as proper as giving something to someone. Everyone knows and you too know, that even in a line of devotional song it is sung: 'The whole world is a beggar; the one giver is Ram.' Who is that Ram? The Ram whom you look for outside yourself is an illusion. Your own soul is your

Ram. What is your soul? Your wise thought and your wise action are your soul."

Hearing Gaurinath Master Saheb's serious words, Ramkishore breathed a sigh of relief. As that breath left him, it felt as though his mind had lost its old burden. As, after the darkness of the new moon, the light of a small piece of moon begins to fall upon the earth, so a light began to enter Ramkishore's mind. Because of this, Ramkishore began to feel lost within himself. On one side, a sense of fulfilment began to grow in his mind; on the other, he also began to feel that apart from the world and the life in which he had lived until then, there was another world too, and that world too had its own inhabitants. Ramkishore said-

"Kaka, it feels as though everything in my mind has somehow disappeared, and my mind has become completely clear and empty of its burden."

Hearing Ramkishore's words, Gaurinath Master Saheb began to think within himself that Ramkishore was not the only one whose mind was cluttered with rubbish, that is, with bad and useless thoughts. There were many such people in society whose minds were filled with such rubbish. Society too was such that all day long it kept spreading that same rubbish, and unskilled, unthinking people kept accepting it and moving on without direction. When one has come upon the earth as a human being, then to keep thinking all the time that if God shows mercy, such and such a thing will be obtained, what is that except illusion? God has already shown mercy by giving one a human body and placing one upon the earth. Ramkishore said-

"Kaka, throughout the day some worry or other keeps

holding the mind. One worry goes away, and another takes hold of the mind."

Hearing Ramkishore's words, Gaurinath Master Saheb began to think within himself, and he too felt that this did not happen only to Ramkishore; it happened to most people. That may also be called ordinary life. But apart from ordinary life, there is another kind of life too, which may be called a special life. Becoming serious, Gaurinath Master Saheb said-

"Ramkishore, just as you have spoken of worry, there is also reflection."

Ramkishore knew the words worry and reflection, but he had never thought deeply about the difference between the two, and so both seemed almost the same to him. But hearing them from Gaurinath Master Saheb's mouth, a curiosity arose in his mind. So he asked-

"Kaka, please explain clearly, point by point, what the difference is between worry and reflection."

Gaurinath Master Saheb replied-

"Ramkishore, thinking without any purpose, that is, thinking without a plan, is worry. Thinking with a plan is reflection. In other words, to raise one thought or another in the mind for no reason and then let the mind run after it, is the cause of worry. But when, having made the purpose of life clear, you think over it in a planned way, that becomes reflection. The same kind of mental activity may become worry, and it may also become reflection."

Gaurinath Master Saheb's thought did not become fully clear in Ramkishore's mind. So he asked-

"Kaka, please explain it in more detail."

Gaurinath Master Saheb continued-

"You know the story of the Mahabharata and the story of the Ramayana, don't you?"

Ramkishore nodded at once-

"Yes."

Gaurinath Master Saheb said-

"First look at the story of the Mahabharata. In the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, countless soldiers were killed. Arjuna was the warrior of the Pandavas. He killed hundreds of thousands of soldiers of the Kauravas."

Ramkishore nodded-

"Yes, Arjuna certainly killed them."

Gaurinath Master Saheb said-

"You also know that if a human being commits even one murder, he deserves hell and goes to hell. But did that happen to Arjuna? Even after killing so many, he went to heaven. To understand this is to understand the difference between worry and purposeful reflection. You will have to understand carefully the subtle circumstances in which reflection becomes worry, and worry becomes reflection."

In Ramkishore's mind, a new light awakened in a new form, and because of it the sorrow of his mind lessened. As that sorrow lessened, his heart blossomed like a lotus. He said-

"Kaka, you had mentioned the Ramayana too?"

Gaurinath Master Saheb said-

"Ramkishore, Hanuman was the greatest devotee of Rama. How many people he killed in Lanka is hidden from no one. Yet he did not become a murderer. This is the difference

between worry and purposeful reflection. If you love your own life, try to know yourself. In a human being with a body there is greater power than even in the gods. You know that even the gods long to get a human body." ❑

The Beneficial and the Harmful

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Like many other villages, Champapur too is a medium-sized village of Mithilanchal. Seven or eight thousand people live in a village spread over eight or nine hundred *bighas* of land. There are many villages in Mithilanchal whose area extends to fifteen hundred or two thousand *bighas*, and whose population also reaches fifteen to twenty thousand.

In Mithilanchal, streams and watercourses, that is, rivers and rivulets, are spread like a net and flow from north to south, but Champapur is not like that. There is not a single stream within Champapur itself. Yet along the eastern boundary of the village, through another village, a stream flows, and along the western boundary too, through the neighbouring village, another stream flows. Because of this, floods do come to Champapur as well and, as in other villages, houses and courtyards are damaged or washed away, and the crops in the fields are swept away.

The stream on the eastern side of the village is seasonal, flowing for about six months. It begins from *Sawan*, from the time the rains start, and by the time *Aghan* and *Pus* pass, it dries

up. But the stream on the western side flows throughout the year; it remains in motion all year round. Until two or three years ago, that is, until a bridge was built over the stream, boats used to ply throughout the year on the western stream and for six months on the eastern stream. But for the last two or three years, boats have stopped plying there. The streams that come from the north, from the hills of Nepal, go ahead and join the Kosi on one side and the Kamala on the other, and then meet the Ganga; therefore, their length too is considerable. With the bridge being built, the people of Champapur and the villages around it have certainly gained convenience, yet there are still hundreds of other villages whose people continue to depend on boats.

The geographical structure of Champapur is different from that of other villages. There are many villages where low-lying fields and marshy stretches are more numerous and higher land is less available. As a result, habitation becomes crowded. There are also many villages where, because there are no such low-lying stretches and higher land is more abundant, people's houses remain scattered. In Champapur, three-fourths of the land is higher ground and one-fourth is lowland. Therefore, there is enough homestead land in the village. Because of this, the settlement has spread out; the village is open and scattered. Champapur is different from other villages in one more respect. In compact villages, when a fire breaks out, the loss is often great; but in an open, scattered village, the loss is not so severe. Champapur is one such village. There are many orchards and groves in Champapur and because of this the villagers have less fear of fire spreading. This is not only true today; it was true in earlier times as well.

Just as living creatures come into being according to the

season, among those creatures there are some that bring benefit to human life, and there are also harmful creatures that cause injury to human life. Just as benefit and harm both come from living creatures, so also they come from flood and drought. When there is excessive rain, a great flood may come, and because of erosion and devastation, much harm is caused. In the same way, when there is no rain, drought comes, and that too causes serious harm. But it also happens that in some year there is neither excessive rain nor severe drought. That year becomes a balanced season, in which crops and gardens prosper, and houses and courtyards do not collapse.

In that same village of Champapur lived two men named Harihar and Murlidhar. Being of the same age, both had studied together from childhood in school and college, and after passing their B.A., both stayed in the village. Just as Harihar's ancestors had followed the life of farming and maintained their family through it, Murlidhar's family too had lived in the same way.

Harihar had ten or eleven bighas of land, while Murlidhar had only seven or eight bighas. By coincidence, both were alike in one respect: just as Harihar had no brother, Murlidhar too had no brother. Yet there was also a difference between the two. Harihar had five sisters, whereas Murlidhar had only two. In other words, Harihar was one among six brothers and sisters, while Murlidhar was one among only three.

Child marriage had gradually come almost to an end in society. By this I mean that in those village societies where child marriage had once prevailed among sixty to seventy per cent of the castes, where boys and girls were married off in childhood, now only ten to fifteen per cent of those castes still

retained the practice. The rest had given up child marriage. Of course, there were, and had also been, some castes among whom child marriage had never existed.

A social evil like child marriage disappeared, but another evil gained strength. In other words, in a society where the custom of dowry had not existed, the practice of dowry became so strong that the marriage of a daughter turned into a terrible social problem.

With time and circumstance, *dharma* and social conduct also change. In a society where taking gifts and dowry in marriage was once regarded as being against dharma, that same dowry, taken in relation to a son's marriage, has in the present atmosphere come to be treated almost as dharma itself. Some years ago, or in the earlier generations of a family line, parents who took dowry for their sons could not raise their heads and move about in society; society condemned them. The same parents who take dowry today walk with their chests thrust out, and society too praises them, saying that such and such a man has set a record of greatness in the history of society. No one else in the village has ever received so much cash and so many things, vehicles, gold, silver, goods and possessions, as that particular person has received. Whatever it is, it is a social issue. Let society understand it.

When the feudal order begins to break down and a new capitalist order begins to rise, such customs and evils are also born in the economic ways of society. These may be called the beneficial and harmful effects of a system. Whether it is the feudal order, the new capitalist order, the capitalist order, the socialist or communist order, or the imperialist order, whenever one system begins to turn into another, some new beneficial

qualities arrive, and some harmful qualities also come with them. This may be called an inevitable process, and it may also be said not to be inevitable, because if it is not allowed to grow, it can be checked. It depends on the conduct of society. As the ways of society are, so its growth will be. Such conduct may later, after some time, begin to hollow out the very heart of society like a wasting disease, but until it becomes fully mature, it continues to grow in one form or another.

Among the six brothers and sisters, Harihar was the second. That is, one sister was older than Harihar, and the other four sisters were younger. Harihar's father, Nasivalal, had married off all five daughters at the proper time, but he had not arranged Harihar's marriage. The reason for not doing so was Harihar's education. As long as the practice of dowry was weak in society, Nasivalal had married off three daughters without dowry. But by the time the fourth daughter's turn came, dowry had gained strength in society. Just as, between earth and sky, at the point where their forces of attraction seem to meet, which we call the horizon, any object or living creature reaching that line appears to be stuck, neither able to go above nor come below, in the same way Nasivalal became stuck at the marriage of his fourth daughter. Yet through his own resourcefulness, he managed to marry off the two younger daughters without dowry. His resourcefulness lay in this: even within a caste, several sub-castes exist, and among them too there are notions of higher and lower status. In that situation, Nasivalal stepped down from his own boundary, the boundary of his caste and married his daughters into another group. In this way, he saved himself from the disease of dowry. Such a marriage is not called an inter-caste marriage.

Just as Nasivalal, Harihar's father, had married off all his

five daughters, so Shridhar, Murlidhar's father, had also married off both his daughters. Like Murlidhar, Harihar too had passed his B.A. with Economics Honours, and both had studied together.

Harihar's father, Nasivalal, said plainly to his son-

"Son, I am ill. You too have grown young now, which means that you too have acquired the right to do everything according to your own judgement. With whatever property my father gave me, I have kept the family cart moving until now. If I have not increased the property given by my father, I have not lost even a single *dhur* of it, not even the smallest measure of land. Just as, in a government job or in the service of some wealthy trader or moneyed man, after a certain age a person is relieved from work, from service, so I too am now free from the burden of the family."

Hearing his father's words, Harihar felt very happy within himself, but he said nothing. As it happened, only a few days later Nasivalal died.

Shridhar did not speak to Murlidhar, his son, in the same way as Nasivalal had spoken to Harihar. Yet he did say this much: "Son, I have reached a certain age. I shall not go away to Kashi or Vrindavan like others. I shall remain in my own home. But you should build your life according to the needs of your family. Whatever family duties I had, I have fulfilled them until now. Only one task remains, that is, to arrange your marriage, and that too I shall do this year. Build your life in your own way."

Hearing his father's words, Murlidhar said neither yes nor no. But within himself he certainly felt pleased that his father had not behaved like other fathers, like this man's father

or that man's father. He had willingly handed over the responsibility of the family. He had not, like many fathers, entered into quarrels, disputes, cases and lawsuits with his son in the name of guardianship.

Four or five months later, Shridhar arranged Murlidhar's marriage. Fulfilling the conviction he held in his mind, that no dowry should be taken for a son, Shridhar said to the bride's family, the family into which Murlidhar was being married-

"A new family has to be established between the two families, the boy's and the girl's. It is the responsibility of both sides that this family should stand as a good and cultured family. I have honestly fulfilled the duty I had towards my son. What your duty is towards your daughter is for you to know."

Both of them, Harihar and Murlidhar, began living in the village. Until then, farming life in their area had been such that there was work only for a few months in the year, and for the remaining months people were largely without work. Thinking of this, Harihar took up an agency of the L.I.C., and through it he came into contact with the people of the village. A person lives according to his own nature. In Harihar's nature there was such a quality, or one may call it a fault, that he would criticise one person before another, and then criticise the second before a third. Since he had contacts throughout society, that is, across the whole village, under the pretext of L.I.C. work, Harihar quietly, without letting others know, began to carry on both his occupations according to his nature: the L.I.C. business and carrying tales. He would carry one person's words, good or bad, to another, and do so while keeping out of sight of the rest. Because of this, people in society came under the illusion that Harihar was their close and intimate man. But among people,

within society, hatred, or at least bitterness, began to grow between one person and another. As a result, distrust spread in society; people's faith in one another began to diminish, and for one reason or another, disputes kept arising all the time.

Murlidhar's father was still alive, but Shridhar did not impose his authority upon Murlidhar and his wife as a guardian, as fathers do in many other families. In his own mind, according to his own nature, Shridhar felt that his days were his days; after him, it would be Murlidhar's family, and society would also remain. Therefore, why should Murlidhar not develop the thought that just as his own family was his own, and just as people, whether good or bad, might behave well or badly towards others, everyone still behaves well towards his own family? Of course, the atmosphere had become such that bitterness and dishonesty had increased even between brother and brother and between father and son, over wealth and property. Yet whatever the atmosphere may be, there is also such a quality in human nature that it may go against the atmosphere.

After taking up the burden of the family, Murlidhar thought that although the family is only one part of society, within one's own family everyone has at least this much freedom, to run the family according to one's own judgement. Yes, one thing was certainly necessary: the family should do nothing that would harm society. Thinking in this way, Murlidhar became fully independent, chose the path of his family's welfare, and set his life upon it. He also improved farming and made the life of agriculture more business-oriented. Until then, that is, during Shridhar's time, they had grown only grain, as most farmers in society did. But Murlidhar limited the cultivation of grain, choosing to grow only as much

grain as was needed for the family's consumption. On the remaining land he began to grow cash crops, from vegetables to fruits and orchards. In keeping with the development of society, at a time when the village roads were still unmetalled, when there were pits and hollows here and there on the road, and during the rains mud and water collected everywhere, he also arranged for a cart fitted with tyres and kept a man to run it. With the help of both farming and the cart, Murlidhar began to be of service to society. For now, let this much be said: just as harm began to come to society through Harihar, so good was being done through Murlidhar. ❑

Nature and Influence

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Every human being on earth has a nature of his own, and the influence of others also affects him. This is not something that has begun only today; it has been so from the very beginning. From the time a living being took the form of a human being, his own nature began to take shape, and through seeing and following others, the influence of others also came upon him.

To make another person understand one's thought, that is, to influence another, is not a matter of today alone; it has been happening through all ages. Yes, in the beginning, when human beings were in an undeveloped state, life too was not as wide and complex as it is today. Just as a child is born in an undeveloped state, and as he gradually grows, his intellect too grows, and his nature also develops and changes, so it is with human life. What one sees in others, and what one hears from their words and thoughts, has influence of both kinds: good and bad. If one hears what is good and sees what is good, the influence is good. If one sees what is bad and hears what is bad, the influence is naturally bad. Every human being has his own nature, which may also be called his own wealth or his own capital. Along with life, that is, with the passage of time, as a

human being grows, his nature too continues to grow.

There is, of course, a pleasure-oriented, materialistic life, and there is also a spiritual life. It is not that this came into being only today or exists only from today. It has always existed, and it exists even now. A pleasure-oriented life and nature means being attracted towards the objects of the world after seeing them. A spiritual life means examining oneself, accepting human sensitivity, and building one's life accordingly. The sages and seers have expressed their thought by recognising two kinds of world. One is the world that we see with the outer eye, the world made of earth, sky, planets and stars, rivers and streams, seas, mountains and so on. The other is the world within the human being, in which there are mind, intellect, discernment and soul. Seen in one way, both worlds exist. Yet the world outside, the world on whose soil we stand and whose produce sustains our life, appears true to ordinary experience; the inner world is harder to grasp. It is in this context that Shankaracharya's well-known saying is remembered: "Brahman is true; the world is false."

Just as, according to one's nature, the qualities of others enter into oneself, so also one's own qualities go into others. The influence of others falls upon a person according to his own consciousness, that is, according to his intellectual power and his own influence also falls upon others. The deeper a person's consciousness is, the deeper his influence reaches. The deeper his vision is, his vision of the world and of himself, the more his life and nature are shaped accordingly.

After returning from college and having something to eat, Rabindra sat in his room and began to think about nature and influence. This thought arose in Rabindra's mind because that

day he had heard the subject from the professor in class. Before a hundred or so students, the professor had spoken fluently for the full forty-five-minute period, and all the students had listened. Rabindra too had listened. There is always some difference between understanding a subject that one already knows a little, even half or partially and understanding something that one does not know at all. Besides, a sharp student understands in a way that a slower student cannot. Rabindra was not exactly among the very sharp students, yet because he was hardworking, he was different from many others.

Rabindra's own thought about nature and influence was this: just as the professor had spoken fluently in class, he too should be able to speak fluently. But for that, one must have that much knowledge. He did not have it. Besides, this was the first day he had heard the subject. How could it happen at once? For that, hard work and dedication were needed, and he did not have those either. By the time his thought reached this point, Rabindra's mind grew weary. In that tired mind another thought arose: to gain knowledge of any subject, one must also have a deep curiosity for it. The greater a person's curiosity to know a subject, the more knowledge he can gain of that subject. A feeling of confidence awakened in Rabindra's mind. As soon as that confidence arose, he thought it would be better to go to the professor himself, ask him, and understand everything from him.

In that confidence, another thought also arose in Rabindra's mind. Professors and teachers who remain caught in the net of private tuition often make things unclear in class so that their tuition work may flourish. But teachers and professors who are not like that, those who regard private

tuition as a sin or a wrong deed, teach honestly in class. And if a student has been absent from class, or even after being present has not understood the lesson properly and if he goes to the teacher's residence and asks him, such a teacher explains the subject even better than in class. Sonbhadra Babu too had this quality. His way of teaching was such that most students understood well in class itself. But a few slow learners like Rabindra did not understand fully. There was a reason for this too. The students who had read at home before coming to class the subject that was to be taught there understood it properly. But students like Rabindra, who had not read at home before the class, faced the same difficulty. Whatever happened to others was not his concern; his concern, after all, was with himself. Not all students had the same facilities either. There were also students who did not get the chance to study at home during the day. Thinking and reflecting in this way, Rabindra's mind accepted that, although it was evening, Sonbhadra Babu must have returned from his walk by now; and if not, he would still go at once.

Rabindra set out for Sonbhadra Babu's residence. Sonbhadra Babu's residence were about half a kilometre from Rabindra's house. The flow of the subject had taken such hold of Rabindra's mind that he did not even feel the distance of the road. Sonbhadra Babu was at home. Just as a person enters his own house without any formality, Rabindra entered Sonbhadra Babu's residence in a rush. Before Sonbhadra Babu could fully recognise him on seeing him, Rabindra said-

"*Pranam*, Sir. I am Rabindra."

Though there may be a distance between teacher and student in class, at home some teachers are of such a nature that

they regard a student as a younger brother. As soon as Rabindra greeted him, Sonbhadra Babu pointed to the chair beside him and said-

"Sit here. What brings you here?"

Rabindra said-

"Sir, I couldn't quite understand what you taught in class today, so I came to ask you about it."

Hearing Rabindra's words, Sonbhadra Babu also became aware of his own weakness. After all, teaching too is an art. According to the kind of art a teacher possesses, students understand his words in that manner. But immediately another thought arose in his mind: if a teacher teaches honestly and the student is unable to listen properly or understand properly, what fault is there in the teacher? Then he thought again that it would be better to ask Rabindra what he had understood, how much he had understood, what he had not understood, and how much he had failed to understand. Whatever he had not understood could be explained to him, and whatever he had already understood need not be repeated unnecessarily. His mind accepted this. As soon as it did, Sonbhadra Babu stated-

"What were you able to understand, and what did you not understand?"

Rabindra asked-

"Sir, what are nature and influence, and how do they...?"

Sonbhadra Babu replied-

"Nature means one's own disposition, one's own inherent nature. It exists in every human being. In another sense, it may also be called one's own *dharma*, which continues as an inborn tendency. Influence means the quality that comes

from another. The quality that enters a person through what another says, or through what one sees in another, is influence."

Sonbhadra Babu explained it so simply that Rabindra understood it completely. Joy rose in his mind, and as that joy rose, a smile too came to his face. Seeing Rabindra smile, Sonbhadra Babu felt that the difficulty troubling him had been removed. In the meantime Rukmini, Sonbhadra Babu's daughter, who studied in Class Nine at high school, arrived with two cups of tea on a tray. Seeing the tea, Sonbhadra Babu said-

"Rabindra, our talk will continue. First have some tea."

Rabindra felt a little hesitant about taking tea, but hearing Sonbhadra Babu's words, he set aside his hesitation and began to take it.

After the tea was finished, Sonbhadra Babu continued-

"Rabindra, how a person understands any subject also depends upon his state of mind."

Hearing "state of mind", Rabindra said-

"Sir, please explain that a little more clearly."

From Rabindra's words, Sonbhadra Babu understood that he had not fully grasped the meaning of state of mind. Explaining it, he answered-

"Rabindra, state of mind means the condition of the mind. The condition of the mind is of two kinds. One is positive and the other is negative. A person whose state of mind is positive understands any subject or matter in a positive way and a person whose state of mind is negative understands it in a negative way. Therefore, always remember to keep yourself in a positive state. A human being's life depends upon this

condition."

Hearing Sonbhadra Babu's thought, it was as though the knot in Rabindra's mind came loose. As soon as that knot loosened, he let out a long breath. From this, Sonbhadra Babu understood that the doubt in Rabindra's mind had been removed. He said-

"Rabindra, one who acts under influence, that is, one who is influenced by others, may become either unsuccessful or successful in life, according to the nature of the influence upon him. But one who acts according to his own nature certainly becomes successful. Therefore, always remember to sit in solitude and keep refining your own nature as much as possible. Keep making your life disciplined. Keep yourself away from the noise and glitter of the world and shape your life according to your true nature as a human being. In this way life will become successful."

Hearing Sonbhadra Babu's words, Rabindra said-

"Sir, it has grown quite late. I shall leave now." ❑

The Essence of Dharma Lies in Action

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The people of Mohitpur village called Gyanchan Baba by many names. Some called him Atmaram Baba, some Budhiyar Baba. Some called him Rupchan Baba, while others called him Sanyasi Baba. Some called him Pandit Baba, and some simply called him Baba. One may ask: what quality did he lack, that while others were known by one or two names, society called him by so many?

Gyanchan Baba was not yet a Baba then; he was simply Gyanchan. When he was studying in middle school, he was about ten or eleven years old. It was the month of *Chait*, and the time of the *Ram Navami* fair in Janakpur. Many people of Mohitpur village decided to go to the fair. Twice a year a fair is held in Janakpur: the first during *Ram Navami* in the month of *Chait*, and the second during *Vivah Panchami* in the month of *Aghan*. From Mohitpur, fifteen or twenty people, men and women together, set out for Janakpur. Gyanchan too went to Janakpur with them.

Mohitpur is such a place that Janakpur, Kusheshwar Sthan and Singheshwar Sthan are almost at the same distance

from it: Janakpur in Nepal, Kusheshwar Sthan in Darbhanga district, and Singheshwar Sthan in Madhepura district. Today, with roads having been built, the convenience of vehicles has become available, but in the time being spoken of, there were no proper roads, and the people of Mohitpur used to go on foot. The fairs at Kusheshwar Sthan and Singheshwar Sthan were held during Shivratri in the month of Phagun then, and they are held even now. People do go there on ordinary days too, but the fair takes place only at Shivratri. Every fair, whether at Janakpur or at Singheshwar and Kusheshwar Sthan, has its own special character. The fair at Singheshwar Sthan is famous as a cattle fair.

It was the month of *Chait*, the *Ram Navami* fair, and the crowd was extremely large. Of course, there is a crowd every year, but that year Gyanchan was lost in the fair. At first, neither did Gyanchan himself realise that he had been lost, nor did the other travellers from Mohitpur realise that Gyanchan was missing.

After making one round of the fair, when everyone gathered at one place to eat, they did not see Gyanchan. All of them became anxious and began wondering where he was. Until then, they had been making arrangements for food and drink. Not seeing Gyanchan, they left all thought of eating and drinking and set out to look for him. On one side there was the tiredness of the fair, for everyone had become tired from walking about; on the other, the disappearance of a companion increased everyone's worry. The fair was so large that to go round it even once took three or four hours. Since there was hardly any space even for an ant to move, walking through the crowd was difficult. When everyone thought of searching for Gyanchan, they also considered among themselves that the

place where they had kept their belongings could serve as a base, and that it would be better to form three or four groups and search. But immediately they thought again that the place where they were sitting, the place they were using at that moment, was not anyone's ancestral property. The moment they rose from there, some other travellers would come and occupy it. Therefore, it would be better for everyone to go together. They did just that, and all of them set out to search for Gyanchan. Gyanchan too, not realising that he himself was lost, thought that his villagers and companions had been lost, and he too was searching for them. But the fair had taken such a vast and bewildering form that everyone seemed lost, and yet no one seemed lost. Even after much searching, Gyanchan could not be found. In the end, tired and defeated, everyone thought that they had to stay there for three days; perhaps, if he was not found then, he might be found later.

For three days all the travellers from Mohitpur remained at the fair, but Gyanchan was not found. Gyanchan too stayed in the fair for three days, searching for his villagers and companions, but he also found no one. Whatever little money he had with him was spent within those three days.

The fair began to disperse. The people who had come to the fair started turning homewards. As the fair thinned out, the anxiety of the travellers from Mohitpur increased, and so did Gyanchan's. Gyanchan was worried about how he would go back to the village alone. There was no proper motor road and he did not know the foot route. In the same way, the villagers, that is, the travellers from Mohitpur, were worried about what Gyanchan's mother and father would say.

To the north of Janakpur there is a *Sthan* called Bhikhari

Baba Sthan. The *mahant* of that *Sthan* was known as Bhikhari Baba. That is why the place itself was called Bhikhari Baba Sthan. From there, Bhikhari Baba himself, along with four or five of his disciples, had come to Janakpur for the Ram Navami fair. When they too had finished moving about the fair and were about to return, they saw Gyanchan crying alone. They understood that this child had probably been separated from his parents. Looking at Gyanchan's face, Bhikhari Baba realised that the boy was promising. The thought also arose in his mind that, after all, only a human child can grow into a truly human being. Gyanchan was as pleasing in appearance as he was lively in speech and manner. Bhikhari Baba asked him-

"Son, why are you crying?"

Gyanchan answered-

"Baba, I have been lost. I had come with the people of my village. They have gone away and I have been left alone."

Bhikhari Baba asked him again-

"Which village do you belong to?"

Gyanchan replied-

"I belong to Mohitpur."

Hearing the name of Mohitpur, Bhikhari Baba tried to remember where Mohitpur was, but he could not place it in his memory. Then he said-

"Come with me. Stay at the Sthan for the time being. When some reliable person from your side is found, I shall send you with him, and you will go back to your village."

Hearing Bhikhari Baba's words, Gyanchan became quiet and set out with him.

There was no temple at Kalyanpur Sthan, but there were

certainly fifteen or twenty *bighas* of land for cultivation and settlement. Everything there was like that of a farming household. Bhikhari Baba himself had not married, and so only men lived at the Sthan. It had all the means needed for farming. It was like a farmer's household. There were two *bighas* of orchard and plantation, about a *katha* of flower garden, a pond of one *bigha*, three wells, and everything else that was needed. Bhikhari Baba had his own daily routine. All the *sadhus* at the Sthan were engaged in the work of a household. There were five cows and two pairs of bullocks, and one person was responsible for their care. Throughout the day he served them, from feeding and watering the cows and bullocks to milking and tending them. In the same way, five or six persons had charge of the farming.

Bhikhari Baba himself kept an eye on everything at the Sthan. Twice a day, in two sittings, he gathered everyone who lived there and, through his discourse, explained what life is and what a human being should do in order to live a good life. At that Sthan, neither caste nor rank had any importance. The conduct there was as though the only caste of human beings was the human caste.

At first, Gyanchan did not like the Sthan, because a little away from it, on all sides, mountains seemed to stand like walls, and all around there were forests and thickets of trees. Seeing the forest and brushwood, a constant fear remained in Gyanchan's mind that man-eating animals such as tigers and lions might be there, and that there was no certainty whether he would live or die from one moment to the next. With the movement of time, change also came into Gyanchan's thoughts, and after a few days the faith within his mind became so strong that the fear of wild animals disappeared from his

heart.

Just as everyone at the Sthan listened to Bhikhari Das's discourses, Gyanchan too began to listen. Because of this, within a few days, as Gyanchan gained an understanding of human life, he also began to understand the meaningfulness of life. As a result, he began to serve and attend to the Sthan as though it were his own home and courtyard.

Time passed. Bhikhari Das too passed away. After thirty years, Gyanchan returned from Kalyanpur to his village. Among the three brothers, Gyanchan had not married, but his two younger brothers had both married and had families with children.

When Gyanchan came to the village, that is, when he remembered the name and location of his ancestral village and, asking people on the way, reached there, no one in the village recognised him. They knew only the name, but with the passage of time, his body had changed and his thoughts too had changed.

Gyanchan's inner strength had become so powerful that even after so many years he still regarded the village and the society of the village as a part of his own heart. When he reached the village, just as the memory of being lost in Janakpur was alive in his mind, so too his family and society remained alive within him. When conversation took place between the two, between the people of Mohitpur and Gyanchan, the society of Mohitpur accepted him, and Gyanchan's own heart too accepted them.

Among the three brothers, Gyanchan was the eldest, and the other two were younger. Both younger brothers had already married. They had children too. His parents, of course, had

died. The previous generation of the village had also almost come to an end; only five or seven people were still alive, and they too had reached old age.

Gyanchan's self-awareness, his knowledge of the self, had become so strong that the seven billion people of the world seemed to be contained within his heart. Service to human beings had entered Gyanchan Baba's mind in such a way that it had become a boundless ocean of love.

Everyone in Mohitpur village began to address him by a name according to his own understanding. Some called him Gyanchan Baba, some Atmaram Baba, some Vivek Baba, and a few even called him Bhagwan Baba. Gyanchan Baba had made this his only aim: the service to human beings which the scriptures and *Puranas* sing of, that alone was his dharma.

He always used to tell the young people-

"Son, *dharma* is not lost anywhere, nor is it covered by anything. It lies within action. As the action, so the dharma. Among the eighty-four lakh forms of living beings, the human being alone is a being born for action, a karmayoni. All the rest are beings born mainly for experience and enjoyment, bhogayoni. Therefore, all human beings on earth share one essential human nature and *dharma* Of course, people are separated by many kinds of distances—differences of country, language, culture, food and way of life. These, along with many other factors, have created divisions among people." ❑

Some Are Deceived by Wealth; Others Outwit It

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It was a dry, drought-stricken season. More than half of *Sawan* had already passed. *Nag Panchami* was the next day, yet not a single heavy shower had fallen. If there had been one or two spells of rain, they had been no more than a sprinkling that merely touched the soil. The paddy seedlings were drying up. Not even the smallest patch of land had yet been brought under cultivation, and the faces of the farmers had lost all colour. Until a few years earlier, farmers used to grow *Aghani* paddy, the paddy that ripens in *Aghan*. But for some years now, keeping the next wheat crop in mind, they had begun cultivating Kartika paddy. This too was a new agricultural experiment of the department. It gave a good yield and because the following crops, wheat and pulses, could also be sown in time, their yield too was good. But this year, because of the drought, that had not happened. There was no proper arrangement of canals and tube-wells as in Punjab, so how could farming of that kind be done here?

Of course, after many years, Rampur had received a good mango crop this time. Because of that, even now, after half of

Sawan had passed, people were still eating fresh mangoes. This did not happen in other years. Rampur village is full of mango orchards and plantations. In proportion to the number of orchards in the village, the crop had not really been abundant; yet, even with a partial crop, it had become more than enough for the people, that is, for the people of Rampur. But there was no arrangement for preserving mangoes, no cold storage facility, so it could only be called enough for immediate use. First, there was no cold storage facility, and secondly, the condition of electricity was such that even proper lighting was not possible. In such a situation, how could a cold storage facility be maintained?

Because of the drought, the heat had increased greatly. On top of that, there was no proper supply of electricity. It was two o'clock in the afternoon, and the heat began to make the mind restless. I was drenched in sweat; nothing felt good. The shade of the house was as hot as the shade under the trees. There was no trace of wind. Because of the heat, I felt as though I would not survive. Suddenly it occurred to me that, to pass such a time, there was no other way except conversation. But with whom could one talk? Everyone was in the same condition. Without warning, the thought came to me that I should go to Sumit Bhai's house and pass some time talking to him. It was only two or half past two in the afternoon, and the sun had already begun to descend. In another two or two and a half hours, the time would certainly begin to change. Thinking this, I placed a *gamchha* on my head and set out for Sumit Bhai's house. His house was only a short distance away, across about two *bighas* of land. There was one more advantage: on the way stood three or four *jamun* trees, so more than half the path lay in shade.

As soon as I reached Sumit Bhai's place, I saw him bathing at the hand-pump. I said-

"Bhai Saheb, why are you bathing so late?"

Rubbing his body and hands, Sumit Bhai observed-

"Kishor, this is the third time I am bathing today. The first time I bathed at eleven, as on other days. After eating and drinking, the heat became so unbearable that I bathed again at one o'clock."

We kept talking while Sumit Bhai continued with his bathing. I stood a little away from the hand-pump. Sumit Bhai wiped his body and hands with the *gamchha* and changed his *dhoti*. He stretched and beat the *dhoti* four times on the platform of the hand-pump, rinsed it in the bucket, poured out the water, left the bucket near the pump, took water in a lota, sprinkled it on the edge of the front courtyard, spread the dhoti out to dry, and came to the front of the house with the lota in his hand. The two of us sat on the cot. As soon as we sat, I mentioned-

"Bhai, the time has become such that it feels difficult to stay alive."

As soon as I said this, Sumit Bhai replied-

"Kishor, our forefathers used to say: 'If it does not rain from the beginning of *Ardra* to the end of *Hasta*, the householder weeps.' More than half of *Sawan* has passed, and nearly a month has gone by since *Ardra Nakshatra* ended. This means there will be drought."

Hearing the word drought from Sumit Bhai's mouth, I too said-

"The signs certainly point that way."

Expanding the thought, Sumit Bhai stated- "Kishor, the

region where we live is called the Ganga-Brahmaputra plain. It slopes from north to south. To our west flows the Ganga and to the east, towards Assam, flows the Brahmaputra. The plain between the two is called the Ganga-Brahmaputra plain. Our Mithila falls entirely within this region."

The two of us, Sumit Bhai and I, were still talking when Manohar too arrived, fanning his face with a *gamchha*, and said-

"Sumit Kaka, life will not be saved!"

Manohar had come through the sun, so he was drenched in sweat. Seeing him soaked in sweat, Sumit Bhai uttered-

"Manohar, electricity has indeed come to the village. The government records have also been duly completed. But you must remember this much: in our region, not only today, and not necessarily every year, drought has always come from time to time. Think how our forefathers faced it and lived lives of a hundred years. There is a palm-leaf fan. Sit on the cot and fan yourself ten times. Your sweat will dry and the restlessness caused by the heat will also lessen."

Manohar listened quietly to Sumit Bhai's words and said nothing. He began to wave the fan lying on the cot in such a way that all three of us, Manohar, Sumit Bhai and I, did not get sufficient breeze, but at least a little air from the fan reached us and the mind felt some relief. I expressed-

"Bhai, in the time of our forefathers, *Aghani* paddy and the old winter-ripening paddy were grown. That paddy was planted from *Magh* and *Phagun* up to *Sawan* and *Bhadon*. In the low-lying fields, paddy was broadcast along with *kherhi*, a local crop; the paddy remained there in seed form. By *Baisakh* and *Jeth* the *kherhi* would be finished and the paddy would

remain, ripening in Aghan. Along with that, until *Sawan* and *Bhadon*, paddy plants, that is, paddy seedlings, were also transplanted and they too ripened in Aghan. But the paddy grown now is not like that. The paddy of earlier times grew according to the season, while the paddy grown today grows according to time, according to the counting of days. From the day the seed is sown in the field to the day the paddy is harvested after ripening, the crop period may be from sixty to one hundred and fifty days. Here, seventy or eighty days have already passed, and the seedlings are burning in the fields. Now even if it rains, it will take fifteen or twenty days for the seedlings to become fit for transplanting. Only then they will be planted. Now tell me, if the time of that paddy has already passed before transplanting, what kind of paddy will it become?"

My thought seemed to agree with Sumit Bhai's mind, so he said nothing. Manohar responded-

"*Kaka*, just as the people of the village and society are leaving farming and running off to distant places, perhaps the same will happen to us too. We have always had the habit of never saving money. To earn and work every day and eat every day is not possible in the life of a householder. Our forefathers used to say that keeping more wealth than needed is the work of a thief, but still we live only by the year. That is, whatever income comes in a year, we pass the whole year with that alone. The situation forming this year is such that how shall we live in the days ahead?"

What Sumit Bhai understood from Manohar's thought, only Sumit Bhai would know. But what he said was this: "Manohar, wealth is wealth; it is not life. When you look

towards the older generations, you will understand that some outwitted wealth, and some were outwitted by wealth."

Hearing Sumit Bhai's thought, I was surprised. What had Sumit Bhai said? I asked him-

"Bhai, please explain clearly what you have just said."

Smiling, Sumit Bhai answered-

"Kishor, to realise one's responsibility is to shape one's own destiny. To become aware of one's duty is to take charge of the direction of one's life. People often remain busy explaining the meaning of destiny, that is, what the word 'destiny' means, but they do not say how destiny is made. So tell me, how is it made? Everyone wants the fruit of virtue, but they do not follow the conduct through which virtue is earned. Even though people do not want the consequences of sin, they conduct themselves in such a way that those consequences inevitably come to them. This contradiction has become part of human life. Then tell me, can one receive the fruit merely by wishing for it?"

Sumit Bhai spoke according to his thought, but my own mind remained fixed on the earlier idea: how does someone outwit wealth, and how does wealth outwit a person? So I asked again-

"Bhai, the earlier thought was left behind. Please explain that a little more clearly."

Smiling, Sumit Bhai said-

"Kishor, human life and wealth are two separate things. Wealth is a means for life; it is not life itself. The person who earns wealth for life and also uses it for life is the one who outwits wealth. But the person who does not understand life as

life and loses life itself while running after wealth in order to gain life, is the one who is outwitted by wealth.”

I half understood Sumit Bhai’s thought and half did not. Therefore nothing came out of my mouth. Sumit Bhai understood my state and stated-

“Kishor, we have fallen into the grip of drought and that is why the mind has become so worried about how we shall live. You know very well that if there is no rain, there will be drought. But in our own country there is also the state of Punjab where farmers do not depend on rain and yet they stand ahead of other states in grain production.”

I knew this too, so I uttered-

“Yes, that is true.”

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Glossary

For The Contest of Life

This glossary explains selected Maithili, Hindi and Sanskrit-derived cultural terms retained in the English translation or necessary for understanding the rural, ritual and social world of the stories. Month equivalents are approximate, because the traditional calendar follows the lunar cycle.

Aghan (*अगहन*) – A month in the traditional Maithili/Hindu calendar, roughly November–December. In the stories it is linked with seasonal change, streams drying up, and the ripening of paddy.

Aghani paddy (*अगहनी धान*) – A traditional variety or season of paddy that ripens around Aghan.

Ardra (*आर्द्रा*) – A nakshatra associated here with the rainy agricultural cycle.

Asin (*आसीन*) – A month in the traditional calendar, roughly September–October, associated here with Durga Puja, Kojagara and the ripening of paddy.

Baba (*बाबा*) – A respectful form of address for an elderly or saintly man. In religious contexts it can mean a spiritual guide, ascetic or revered elder.

Babu (*बाबू*) – A polite honorific used for a respected man, teacher, elder or educated person; close to 'Mr' or 'sir' in social usage.

Baisakh (*बैसाख*) – A traditional month, roughly April–May.

Bhadon (*भादो*) – A traditional monsoon month, roughly August–September.

Bhagwan Baba (*भगवान बाबा*) – A reverential title given to a person regarded by villagers as exceptionally godlike, compassionate or spiritually elevated.

Bhabhi (*भौजी/भाभी*) – Brother's wife; also a respectful form of address for a woman of that family relation.

Bhai (*भाय/भाई*) – Brother; also an affectionate or respectful form of address added after a man's name.

Bigha (*बीघा*) – A traditional unit of land measurement. Its size varies by region; in many parts of Bihar and Mithila it is conventionally divided into twenty kathas.

Bullock (*बड़द*) – A castrated male ox used for agricultural work and rural transport.

Chachaji (*चाचाजी*) – Father's younger brother; also a respectful address for an elder who is treated like a paternal uncle.

Chait (*चैत*) – A traditional month, roughly March–April; Ram Navami falls in this period.

Chaur (*चौर*) – A broad, flat, often low-lying tract of land, usually associated with fields and seasonal water in Mithila.

Dhar (*धार*) – A local stream, watercourse or river channel, especially one flowing through or near a village.

Dharamraj (*धर्मराज*) – A deity associated with justice, righteousness and moral order in local Hindu tradition.

Dharma (*धर्म*) – Moral duty, righteous conduct and the ethical order of life. In this collection it is wider than organised religion and is tested through action.

Dhoti (*धोती*) – An unstitched lower garment traditionally worn by men, wrapped around the waist and legs.

Durga Puja (*दुर्गापूजा*) – A major Hindu festival in honour of Goddess Durga, celebrated during the autumn Navaratri.

Eidgah (*ईदगाह*) – An open prayer ground where Muslims gather for Eid prayers.

Gamchha (*गमछा*) – A light cotton towel used for wiping, bathing, covering the head, carrying small items, and everyday village use.

Guruvar / Varsapait (*गुरुवार/बरस्पैत*) – Thursday, traditionally regarded as an auspicious day; literally associated with the guru and knowledge.

Haat (*हाट*) – A periodic rural market where villagers buy and sell goods.

Hakar (*हकार*) – A formal call or invitation to attend a social or ceremonial gathering.

Hasta (*हस्त*) – A nakshatra used here in a traditional rain-related saying.

Jamun (*जामुन*) – The Indian blackberry; in the story, the smaller local variety is called jamuni.

Janakpur (*जनकपुर*) – A historic and sacred town in Nepal, associated with King Janak, Sita and the Ramayana tradition.

Jeth (जेठ) – A traditional summer month, roughly May–June.

Kabir Panth (कबीर पंथ) – A devotional tradition associated with Kabir.

Kaka (काका) – Paternal uncle; also a respectful address for an older man close to the family.

Kali (काली) – A Hindu goddess worshipped as a powerful form of divine feminine energy.

Kalyanpur Sthan (कल्याणपुर स्थान) – A sacred or monastic place in the story, organised around service, labour, discipline and spiritual life.

Karma (कर्म) – Action or deed. In the story on dharma, karma means lived action through which moral truth becomes visible.

Kartik (कातिक/कार्तिक) – A traditional month, roughly October–November.

Kartika paddy (कार्तिक धान) – A newer paddy crop or variety associated with cultivation timed around Kartik, allowing the following wheat and pulse crops to be sown in time.

Katha (कट्ठा) – A traditional land measure. In many parts of Bihar and Mithila, twenty kathas make one bigha, though local measures may vary.

Kherhi (खेरही) – A local companion crop grown in low-lying fields along with paddy. Its exact botanical identity may vary by locality.

Kojagara (कोजगरा) – An autumn full-moon festival in Mithila, often associated with paan, makhana and ceremonial gifts, especially in families where a marriage has taken place during the year.

Kusheshwar Sthan (*कुशेश्वर स्थान*) – A Shiva pilgrimage centre in Darbhanga district, Bihar.

Lakh (*लाख*) – One hundred thousand.

Lakshmi (*लक्ष्मी*) – The Hindu goddess of prosperity, grace and household well-being.

LIC (*एल.आई.सी.*) – Life Insurance Corporation of India; in the story, connected with insurance-related village work.

Lota (*लोटा*) – A small rounded water vessel, usually metal or plastic, used for bathing, drinking, ritual use and household water handling.

Magh (*माघ*) – A traditional winter month, roughly January–February.

Mahant (*महन्त*) – The head or custodian of a monastery, temple or religious establishment.

Mahavir (*महावीर*) – A revered name for Hanuman in many North Indian traditions; Mahavir temples are Hanuman temples in this context.

Makhana (*मखान*) – Fox nut or gorgon nut, an aquatic food product strongly associated with Mithila, used in food and ritual offerings.

Mahatmaji (*महात्माजी*) – A respectful address for a saintly or supposedly holy person; in context it can also carry irony when holiness is false or exploitative.

Maithil (*मैथिल*) – A person belonging to Mithila's cultural-linguistic community.

Maithili (*मैथिली*) – The language of Mithila; also used for the region's literary and cultural tradition.

Matri Navami (*मातृनवमी*) – A ritual day during Pitri Paksha, especially associated with remembering deceased mothers or female ancestors.

Mela (*मेला*) – A fair or public gathering, often connected with festivals, pilgrimage, trade and social meeting.

Mithila (*मिथिला*) – The historical and cultural region spread across north Bihar and adjoining parts of Nepal.

Mithilanchal (*मिथिलांचल*) – The Mithila region understood as a cultural and geographical zone.

Nag Panchami (*नाग पंचमी*) – A Hindu festival honouring serpent deities, observed during the monsoon season.

Nakshatra (*नक्षत्र*) – A lunar mansion or star-division used in the traditional Indian calendar.

Navami (*नवमी*) – The ninth lunar day of a fortnight, important in several Hindu ritual calendars.

Nirgun (*निर्गुण*) – The formless aspect of the divine, especially in devotional traditions such as Kabir Panth.

Paan (*पान*) – Betel leaf, often served with areca nut and spices; used in hospitality, ritual and social exchange.

Paksha (*पक्ष*) – A lunar fortnight. The traditional month is divided into the bright and dark halves.

Panchami (*पंचमी*) – The fifth lunar day of a fortnight, often associated with specific festivals such as Nag Panchami and Vivah Panchami.

Phagun (*फागुन)* – A traditional month, roughly February–March.

Pitri Paksha (*पितृपक्ष)* – The fortnight of ancestral rites, during which offerings are made for departed ancestors.

Puja (*पूजा)* – Ritual worship performed before a deity or sacred presence.

Pus (*पूस)* – A traditional winter month, roughly December–January.

Ram Navami (*राम नवमी)* – The festival marking the birth of Lord Rama, observed in the month of Chait.

Roti (*रोटी)* – A flatbread made from wheat or similar flour, commonly eaten in North Indian households.

Saheb *(साहैब/साहब)* – An honorific roughly meaning 'sir', used for respected men, teachers, officials or elders.

Sanyasi (*संन्यासी)* – A renunciate or ascetic who has withdrawn from ordinary worldly life for spiritual discipline.

Sarangi (*सारंगी)* – A bowed string instrument used in North Indian folk and devotional singing.

Sawan (*सावन)* – A monsoon month, roughly July–August, closely tied to rain, agriculture and seasonal anxiety in the stories.

Shivratri (*शिवरात्रि)* – A night festival dedicated to Lord Shiva.

Singheshwar Sthan (*सिंहेश्वर स्थान)* – A Shiva pilgrimage centre in Madhepura district, Bihar.

Sita paddy (*सीता धान)* – A named variety of paddy described in the story as fine-looking, high-yielding and pleasant in taste.

Sthan (*स्थान)* – A place; in religious usage, a shrine, sacred seat or spiritual settlement.

Vivah Panchami (*विवाह पंचमी)* – A festival commemorating the marriage of Rama and Sita, celebrated especially at Janakpur in Aghan.

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Notes